PRICE $8.99

JAN. 2 & 9, 2023

THE NEW YORKER



VISIT…

LANZAROTE Caliente.com

A Critic at Large

- **Seventy-five Years After Indian Partition, Who Owns the Narrative?**

By Parul Sehgal

Before it was an edict, and a death sentence, it was a rumor. To many, it must have seemed improbable; I imagine my grandmother, buying her vegetables at the market, settling her baby on her hip, craning to hear the news—a border, where? Two borders, to be exact. On the eve of their departure, in 1947, after more than three hundred years on the subcontinent, the British sliced the land into a Hindu-majority India flanked by a Muslim-majority West Pakistan and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), a thousand miles apart. The boundaries were drawn up in five weeks by an English barrister who had famously never before been east of Paris; he flew home directly afterward and burned his papers. The slash of his pen is known as Partition.

A tidy word, "Partition." Amid what the Punjabis call the *raula*—the "uproar"—the region convulsed with violence, Hindus and Sikhs on one side, Muslims on the other. Entire villages were massacred. Neighbors turned on each other. It's estimated that a million people were killed, and that seventy-five thousand women and girls were abducted and raped, a third of them under the age of twelve. Millions of refugees fled in one of the largest and most rapid migrations in history. "Blood trains" crisscrossed the fresh border, carrying silent cargo—passengers slaughtered during the journey. Cities transformed into open-air refugee camps, like the one in Delhi to which my grandmother escaped in the night, alone with her children, feeding the baby opium, the story goes, so he would not cry. Bhisham Sahni's "Tamas," a 1973 Hindi novel set in that period, brings such a camp to life. The exhausted refugees are greeted by a functionary of the Relief Committee with the unpropitious nickname Statistics Babu. "I want figures, only figures, nothing but figures," he instructs. The refugees mill around him, unhearing. They weep, stare blankly. They repeat, in exasperating detail, every step of their journeys. "Why don't you understand?" Statistics Babu pleads. "I am not here to listen to the whole 'Ramayana.' Give me figures—how many dead, how many wounded, how much loss of property and goods. That is all."

Is that where the story lies? What do "figures, only figures" convey of the full horror and absurdity of 1947? Of a border that cut through forests, families, and shrines, that saw wild animals apportioned between the two

countries and historical artifacts snapped in half? In “Tamas,” the testimonies of the survivors reveal all that records omit and conceal. A refugee is desperate to recover his wife’s gold bangles: won’t Statistics Babu help him? Those bangles still circle his wife’s wrists, however, and she lies at the bottom of a well. It is a detail perhaps lifted from the case of the real-life village of Thoa Khalsa, now in Pakistan, where almost a hundred Sikh women drowned themselves and their children. We don’t have the figures for women killed by their own families or forced to kill themselves in the name of protecting their honor. There are no records of those who died of heartbreak. My family migrated from an area not far from Thoa Khalsa. Only my great-uncle remained; he lay beheaded in the courtyard of his home. Three months later, his wife died—of grief, some say. Their children were scattered. There are no firm figures available for orphaned children, or for children abandoned along the journey because they were too small to walk quickly enough.

The Best Books of 2022

Read our reviews of the year’s notable new fiction and nonfiction.



This past year has marked seventy-five years of Partition, a process of fracturing that continues in the imagination and in memory. Each generation

has posed new questions, searching for places where the stories can be found—in statistics, in stubborn reticence, in a pair of gold bangles. A sturdy consensus long held that the fullest account of 1947 could be found not in facts and figures—not in nonfiction at all—but in texts like "Tamas," in literature. We were steered strenuously away from the scholarship and toward fiction and poetry—often by the scholars themselves. "Creative writers have captured the human dimensions of Partition far more effectively than have historians," the scholar Ayesha Jalal has written. Novels were said to surpass even survivor testimonies for vividness and accuracy. Two decades ago, Akash Kapur, writing in the *Times* about a landmark work of Partition oral history, directed the reader back to "the excellent fiction" of Partition, such as Khushwant Singh's "Train to Pakistan" (1956), which "does a far better job of evoking the terror, the bewilderment and the remorse that still shadow so many lives on the subcontinent."

Partition literature fills a long shelf. There is early fiction by survivors and spectators: realist narratives (Singh's "Train to Pakistan"), feminist epics (Yashpal's "This Is Not That Dawn"), stripped-down, nightmarish short stories (Saadat Hasan Manto's "Black Margins"). In the nineteen-eighties came a new flourishing, with now canonical novels by Salman Rushdie ("Midnight's Children"), Amitav Ghosh ("Shadow Lines"), and Bapsi Sidhwa ("Ice Candy Man"). Certain tropes and tendencies repeat. There is a reliance on coming-of-age stories, in which the loss of the nation's innocence maps neatly onto a character's; twins illustrate a conjoined fate; a dead woman personifies the fractured motherland. (These tropes are so alluring that a recent American young-adult novel about Partition, Veera Hiranandani's "The Night Diary," combined all of them, in a coming-of-age story about a twin born to a mother who dies in childbirth.)

But the unity, and moral power, of the genre derives from its sustained confrontations with the violence of Partition. The official narrative of independence was one of celebration. "Before the birth of freedom we have endured all the pains of labor and our hearts are heavy with the memory of this sorrow," Jawaharlal Nehru announced on August 14, 1947, as independence and Partition were imminent. "Nevertheless, the past is over and it is the future that beckons to us." The killings were portrayed as a spasm of collective madness, a regrettable development on the path to progress. In fact, it was the efficiency and organization of the attacks that

came to distinguish the episode, and its stamp was the targeting and torture of women.

What we call Partition fiction might be more pointedly described as one of the most extensive bodies of literature committed to cataloguing rape and sexual terrorism—the frenzy that left corpses riddled with bite marks, pregnant women slit open, and religious slogans branded upon faces and genitals. What Nehru dismissed as labor pains, what films dealt with obliquely, and some families not at all, is bluntly documented in the novels—the grisly discovery in “Ice Candy Man,” for example, of a bag stuffed with severed breasts. Novels filled in the extensive gaps in the archives. “There were no trials for perpetrators of violence, the authorities took no statements, and very little data was gathered,” the historian Manan Ahmed has written. “Even the trains, which ran covered in blood across the Punjab border, were scrubbed clean. . . . In fact, the only physical traces left are the people themselves. And they too shucked their old identities for fear of more violence.”

If it seems crude to treat literature as testimony, we cannot ignore the fact that some writers conceived of themselves as eyewitnesses. They shared a commitment to preserve not only what went unsaid but what felt unsayable—that the violence of Partition was not necessarily an aberration in the lives of women, for one. The upheaval could be liberation—the domestic spaces to which women were confined could protect but also imprison, as Daisy Rockwell notes in the afterword to her translation of Khadija Mastur’s 1962 novel, “The Woman’s Courtyard.” As early as 1950, Amrita Pritam’s novel “Pinjar” examined the refusal of families to take back women and girls who had been abducted and “contaminated.” The sexual violation of men during that period remains a taboo subject; I find mention of castrations in “Train to Pakistan” and almost nowhere else.

This is the work of the novel: to notice, knit, remember, record. The novel confers wholeness and unity to a story of division. The novel—it cannot help itself—reconciles. But it was only by taking a truncheon to the form that some of the greatest Partition fiction was created. Out of the rubble of the cities and the scorched fields emerged Saadat Hasan Manto’s glittering, razored shards. A recent collection, “The Dog of Tithwal,” gathers classics by the Urdu master of the short story. Born in 1912 to a Kashmiri family in

the northern state of Punjab, Manto fell under the spell of Gorky and Poe, not to mention the rotgut that would kill him at the age of forty-two. Fluent in almost every genre, he wrote while sitting on the family sofa, his daughters climbing over him as he churned out polemics, screenplays, and twenty-two volumes of short stories marked by a warm, coarse, and occasionally menacing sexuality that so agitated the censors. He was tried for (and acquitted of) obscenity six times; his story “Khol Do” was condemned as an incitement to rape. Partition tore him from Mumbai, his home and muse. Marooned in Lahore, he began writing furiously about what he had seen. The most famous of these stories, “Toba Tek Singh,” tells the tale—based in fact—of India and Pakistan dividing up patients of mental institutions according to their religion. One Sikh inmate cannot figure out which country his village belongs to; he roots himself between the barbed-wire fences of each border, and dies on a patch of unclaimed earth.

Manto established his distinctive form in the book “Black Margins” (1948): thirty-two sketches of compressed power, some no more than a few sentences long, which brought to life the obscene logic of the new world. In “The Advantage of Ignorance,” a sniper takes aim at a child. His companion objects, but not for the expected reason. “You are out of bullets,” he exclaims. In “Double Cross,” a character complains about being sold bad petrol—it won’t set fire to any shops. The stories are not just expressions of shock; they are modes of refusal—a response to facts that will not, ought not, be easily assimilated into a narrative. The ink feels fresh, wet. Manto remains our eternal contemporary, his capacity to unnerve undiminished.

Even his admirers can be caught trying to tame him—pushing him into earnest ethical stances. In the introduction to the recent collection, the poet Vijay Seshadri describes Manto’s Urdu as firm, spare, and “easily accessible to translation.” In truth, Manto frightens his translators. The rehabilitation mission starts with them. Khalid Hasan begins his translation by defanging the title of “Khol Do,” which Manto is said to have considered his best work. Hasan names it “The Return,” instead of the literal translation, “Open It”—the command issued in the story’s chilling climax. As it begins, a Muslim girl has clearly been abducted by a Hindu mob. Men from her community go in search of her. When her father spots them accompanying a body, the reader understands that the girl, Sakina, has been attacked again, by the very men who promised to rescue her. She is brought to a hospital,

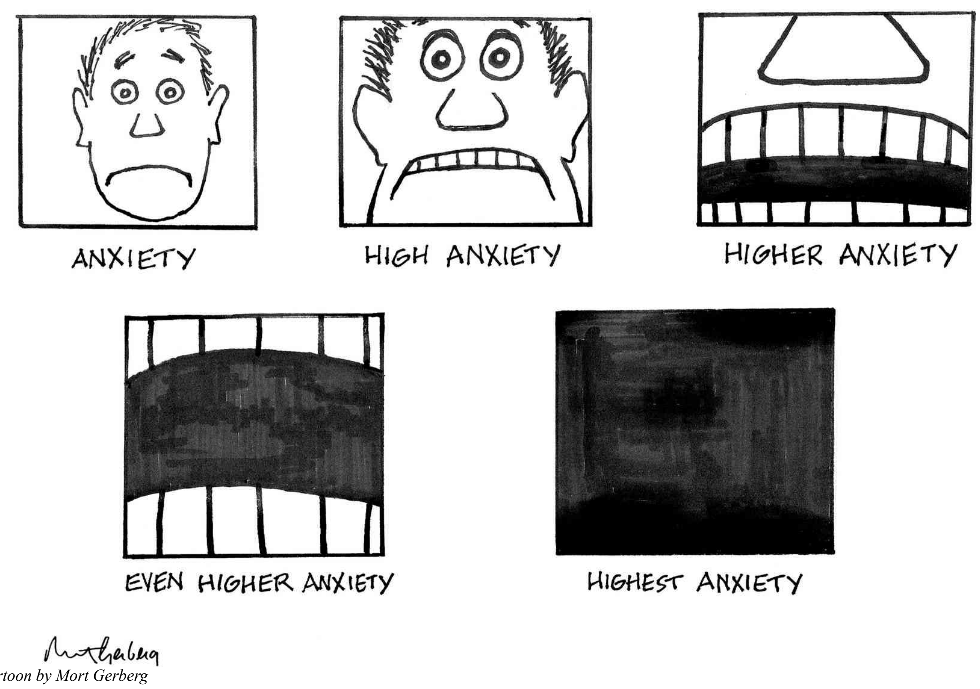
seemingly lifeless. A doctor enters the small, stifling room, and gestures to a window: “Open it.” There is a jerk of movement; Sakina’s hands move to untie the drawstring of her pants and lower them down her thighs. Her father exults—“She is alive”—and the doctor breaks into a cold sweat.

There’s a crucial line in the story. In Urdu, it reads, “*Sakina ke murda jism mein jumbish hui.*” Hasan has variously translated it as “The young woman on the stretcher moved slightly” and “Sakina’s body stirred.” A more faithful translation would be something like “There was a movement in Sakina’s corpse.” It was Hasan who respectfully refers to Sakina as “the young woman,” Hasan who wants her still to be Sakina. Manto refers to her corpse. He is interested in the threshold that she has crossed, what the doctor notices and the father cannot—the threshold we keep encountering in his stories about Partition.

Manto’s fiction routinely blurs the line between life and death, sanity and madness. Characters merge with their weapons. (In “The Last Salute,” a platoon leader “felt as though he had turned into a rifle, but one whose trigger was jammed.”) Weapons act as agents in their own right. (From “Mishtake”: “Ripping the belly cleanly, the knife moved in a straight line down the midriff, in the process slashing the cord which held the man’s pajamas in place.”) These transformations occur beyond the characters’ awareness. *You will cross the threshold without knowing*, Manto seems to say. *You will not be able to see what you have become*. There is no self-knowledge or remorse, no greater sense of justice than there was in 1947. Nor does the author permit himself the reprieve of moralizing. There are only loops of retribution. “Bitter Harvest” begins with a Muslim father screaming the name of his young daughter, who has been raped and murdered: “Sharifan! Sharifan!” The story ends with him seizing, raping, and strangling a Hindu girl, leaving her father to find the body and scream her name: “Bimla, my daughter, Bimla.”

In the past generation, though, Partition “shimmered away as a suitable subject” for fiction, in the words of the literary critic Nilanjana Roy. The mantle was taken up by oral historians. Recurrent eruptions of violence reawakened memories of the killings of 1947—its unfinished business, the rot in the wound. The 2002 Gujarat riots, in particular, shared the grammar of Partition violence: the frenzy masking careful coördination, the targeting

of women, the impunity. The feminist writer and publisher Urvashi Butalia's "The Other Side of Silence" (1998) had been sparked by the Sikh massacres of 1984, which led her to think more deeply about her family's history. Through interviews with survivors, Butalia traced a story of Partition as its meaning was shaped (and evaded) in private life, in families. This was Partition seen from the perspective of women, children, Dalits, all those left out of the grand political narratives, and told with the kind of feeling and detail that, as the scholar Deepti Misri writes, could never have made it into Statistics Babu's ledger. The testimonies compiled by Butalia—as well as by Ashis Nandy, Veena Das, Ritu Menon, and Kamla Bhasin—rippled with complexities and contradiction. Memories of loss exist, sometimes queasily, alongside memories of gain—the birth of nations, the pride of survival, the unexpected opportunities created in the upheaval. I was weaned on stories of my family's Partition: my beheaded kinsman; my grandmother wheedling extra rations for her children in the camps; the two young girls, sisters, who went missing. Beneath these stories pulsed the uncomfortable knowledge that the very tumult of Partition allowed some families like mine, living under the boot of brutal feudal hierarchy, their first opportunity to prise themselves free.



Cartoon by Mort Gerberg

Share

Link copied

Shop

In the past few decades, popular chroniclers influenced both by fiction and by oral history have taken up polyphonic approaches. Yasmin Khan's "The Great Partition" and Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar's "The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia," both published in 2007, at

the sixtieth anniversary of the event, synthesized Statistics Babu's facts and figures with the testimonies of survivors. More expansive histories of Partition began to be told, attending to the links between 1947 and the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971, the migration of Dalits, and the effects of Partition on tribal communities, on Kashmir, on the diaspora.

At its seventy-fifth anniversary, Partition has found still more eclectic forms. The new generation coming to the story—midnight's grandchildren—are not scholars, for the most part. They typically have no specialized credentials. Theirs is a different qualification: this is their inheritance. They include the New York rapper Heems, who describes himself as a "product of Partition"; the installation artist Pritika Chowdhry, who constructs "anti-memorials"; Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, an Oscar-winning filmmaker and the founder of the Citizen Archive of Pakistan (*CAP*); and Guneeta Singh Bhalla, a physicist who has established a crowdsourced library of testimonies. It's no longer enough for fiction to fill the silences. These self-taught archivists search for whatever evidence they can find; they build on the work of oral historians like Butalia, finding the archives in the last remaining survivors.

Their ranks are thinning. That young woman, so startled by the rumors, who fled with her children—my grandmother—died in 2006. Her eldest child, the child who could walk—my aunt—died last year. Organizations like Obaid-Chinoy's *CAP* and Bhalla's 1947 Partition Archive gather testimonies with fresh urgency. Online communities invite survivors to upload their stories or find childhood friends. Project Dastaan, an organization formed by students at Oxford, not only collects testimonies but also offers refugees a chance to "visit" their homeland using virtual-reality headsets.

This cohort of oral historians has confronted a reticence born not only of suffering but also of shame, arising from complicity, intimate betrayals—Manto's thresholds. "The true horror is not what your neighbors did to you," the historian Faisal Devji notes, "but what your own family members might have done out of force of necessity: Leave somebody behind who was handicapped, who was unable to walk or flee."

In "Remnants of Partition" (2019), Aanchal Malhotra, a Delhi-based artist turned oral historian, devised a method to sidestep the silences. Her grandparents, Punjabi migrants from Pakistan, were skillful at thwarting her

questions about their journey, but conversations suddenly bloomed when she asked what they carried with them. Her great-uncle produced a *ghara*, a metallic vessel for churning yogurt, and a *gaz*, a yardstick from the family tailoring business. He absently handled the objects as he spoke; they stimulated memories of a rich, associative, unexpected kind, full of longing. Malhotra took the same question to her grandmother, and to other survivors. Her book is a history of Partition told in twenty-one possessions: a string of pearls, a sword. These objects are not relics; many are pointedly, movingly, still in use. Her grandmother travelled across the border with a small folding knife given to her by her family, who told her to use it against attackers or on herself. The same blade, "swallowed by rust," now accompanies Malhotra's grandmother on her morning walks, as she slices leaves from an aloe plant—the weapon transformed into an agent of healing.

The music video opens in a train station—the archetypal setting of Partition horror. The windows are shattered; debris lies scattered on the floor. The waiting area fills with passengers, looking at one another warily. A man sitting alone on a bench begins to sing a ghazal by the Pakistani poet (and Partition migrant) Saifuddin Saif: "This moonlit night has been a long time coming / The words I want to say have been a long time coming." The mood warms. A traveller darns another's torn clothing; a woman admires another's baby.

"Chandni Raat," an Urdu single from the Pakistani American singer Ali Sethi, was released in 2019, just days before fighting broke out between India and Pakistan. Once again, war seemed imminent. The YouTube comment section of the accompanying music video became a gathering place much like the train station's waiting area. Strangers congregated, invoking the song's message of unity. "It became kind of an anthem," Sethi says. "It felt genuinely miraculous."

The son of prominent journalists, Sethi grew up in Lahore—"a haunted city," he calls it. The old part of the city was full of signs of the people who fled, some sixty per cent of the population; home alcoves once reserved for shrines now held a refrigerator or an electric fan. "For me, turning to Hindustani music was the only way I could unpartition myself—go back to a place that was not only pre-Partition but pre-colonial," he says. Hindustani music, as he describes it, is sacred and secular, a mongrel of Hindu, Sikh,

and Muslim traditions. He was taught by two renowned singers, both Partition migrants, and during the *COVID* lockdown he used social media to bring together musicians from across the border to collaborate. He cites a teacher of his who taught him that metaphors "help us to dialogue across distances." Song, he says, is a space we can live inside. Just as the little knife of Malhotra's grandmother was repurposed, the train station in the "Chandni Raat" video has been, too—a place of death reconceived as a place of reconciliation.

Violence has long felt emblematic of the story of Partition—it was what lurked in Manto's "black margins"—and that history of violence is now deployed as a political weapon, stoking suspicion, retribution. Anam Zakaria, who works on cross-cultural exchange between India and Pakistan, describes younger generations—who have grown up in the shadow of war—as even more hostile toward one another than the generation who survived Partition. India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, recently declared August 14th to be Partition Horrors Remembrance Day. By choosing the date of Pakistan's independence day (India celebrates August 15th as its day of independence), and by carefully referring to those denied "cremation," Modi framed it as an occasion to mourn only Hindu and Sikh victims, and to single out Muslims as aggressors. A younger generation struggles not just to devise new modes of accessing and telling the story of Partition but also to prevent it from being used to justify further bloodletting. They want to return the event to survivors and their families—and to highlight memories and emotions that have been occluded by the fixation on carnage. Malhotra asks, "Why do we immediately think of the trains? Why don't we think of the friendship left behind or the love affairs that may have gotten cut?" Kavita Puri, a BBC journalist, similarly wants to see beyond the brutalities: "Partition, though filled with horror in so many ways, is also a story about love." Can the story of Partition be told in a different genre? Will love stories keep the blood at bay?

In "Tomb of Sand," the winner of the 2022 International Booker Prize, Geetanjali Shree pays homage to Partition fiction, imagining the great novelists gathering near the border. "The group of Partition writers has come to sit in a row, and every person has a name card at their place like at a formal banquet. Bhisham Sahni. Balwant Singh. Joginder Pal. Manto. Rahi Masoom Raza. Shaani. Intizar Hussain. Krishna Sobti. Khushwant Singh.

Ramanand Sagar. Manzoor Ehtesham. Rajinder Singh Bedi.” Yet Shree also explores the possibility of writing one’s own story of Partition. Ma, the central figure in the novel, an eighty-year-old widow, spends more than a hundred pages of the book lying in bed, her back to the reader, before finally, heroically, reclaiming her life, by going back across the border to Pakistan and falling in love.

“A border,” she proposes,

> does not enclose, it opens out. It creates a shape—it adorns an edge. This side of the edging blossoms, as does that. Embroider the border with a shimmering vine. Stud it with precious stones. What is a border? It enhances a personality. It gives strength. It doesn’t tear apart. A border increases recognition. Where two sides meet and both flourish. A border ornaments their meeting.

Partition stories offer few consolations; one wants to hold this one tightly in hand, like Grandmother’s little knife. But what is that folded blade but sheathed violence? Has it completed its work? How does one begin to tell a tale so turbulently in progress? “It will jump, it will cross over, the story will not end,” Shree writes. Manto’s shards, unblunted by any urge toward narrative neatness, find their mark for a reason.

There’s a quiet detail in “The Dog of Tithwal,” one planted delicately, as if designed to be lost amid the gaudy violence. The Pakistani Army and the Indian Army gather on two hills, facing each other. Between bursts of gunfire, the soldiers sing. Only the reader can know that they are both singing a folk song of romance and longing. The reader experiences, at first, a frisson of recognition—*ah, to be so alike, on either side of a divide*. But how little it matters, once the action of the story is under way. Both sides send a dog back and forth, frightening and torturing it to death. The dog cannot hear the singing; he cannot name the song. Sing whatever you like while you can, the writer seems to say. The black margins are closing in. ♦

By Richard Brody

By The New Yorker

By The New Yorker

By Keith Gessen

A Reporter at Large

- Trapped in the Trenches in Ukraine

By Luke Mogelson

One Sunday in early October, I had lunch at an outdoor restaurant on Andriyivsky Descent, in downtown Kyiv, with a thirty-seven-year-old American who went by the code name Doc. I'd rented an apartment on the same cobblestone street back in March, while the Ukrainian military was repulsing a Russian assault on the city. At the time, the neighborhood had been deserted, and a portentous quiet was broken only by sporadic explosions and whining air-raid sirens. Now Andriyivsky Descent was thronged with couples and families promenading in the autumn sun. Local artists sold oil paintings on the sidewalk. A trumpeter and an accordionist played for tips. Doc sipped a Negroni. Long-bearded, square-jawed, and barrel-chested, he wore a green tactical jacket and a baseball cap embroidered with the Ukrainian national trident. A thick scar spanned his neck, from a bar fight in North Carolina during which someone had sliced his throat with a box cutter. Toward the end of our meal, an older man in a leather fedora approached our table. "International Legion?" he asked, in accented English. I pointed at Doc; the man extended his hand and told him, "I just wanted to say thank you."

Doc scrutinized his glass, embarrassed. After the man left, I remarked that such recognition must feel good. "It feels weird," Doc replied. He'd been a marine in his twenties, and had fought, as a machine gunner, in Iraq and Afghanistan. It had always made him uncomfortable when American civilians thanked him for his service. When his contract ended, in 2011, he'd been eager to put war behind him. "It was a hard cut," he said. "I was never going back." Shortly after being discharged, he moved from North Carolina to New York City, where he'd been accepted at Columbia University. Using the G.I. Bill, he majored in computer science, with a minor in linguistics. He did two summer internships at Google, and when he graduated the company hired him full time.

While Doc was working as a software engineer, in Manhattan, his view of Big Tech progressively dimmed. He was disillusioned by the Presidency of Donald Trump, and he blamed social media, in part, for the country's polarization. This past January, he notified Google that he was quitting. He was unsure what he'd do next. "I didn't really have direction," he recalled.

Then, on February 24th, Russia invaded Ukraine. From Doc's perspective, "it was pretty serendipitous."

The next afternoon, he visited the Ukrainian consulate in midtown. The reception area was swarmed with Ukrainian immigrants seeking information, and Doc was asked to come back after the weekend. That Sunday, Volodymyr Zelensky, the President of Ukraine, announced the creation of an International Legion and issued an "appeal to foreign citizens" to join. Volunteers would be defending not only Ukraine, Zelensky insisted: "This is the beginning of a war against Europe, against European structures, against democracy, against basic human rights, against a global order of law, rules, and peaceful coexistence." When Doc returned to the consulate, an official advised him to go to Poland, giving him a phone number for someone who would guide him from there.

Two weeks later, Doc landed in Warsaw with a duffle bag containing medical supplies and body armor. He texted the number and was directed to a motel near the Ukrainian border. Several groups of men, "obviously military guys," loitered in the parking lot. A few had unrolled sleeping bags in the lobby. Nobody would talk to Doc. Paranoia about spies and infiltrators was acute. The previous day, Russian cruise missiles had targeted the main training camp for the International Legion, in Yavoriv, a Ukrainian city about an hour's drive away. Though no foreigners had died, dozens of Ukrainians were killed. A friend of mine—a Canadian Army veteran who'd joined the Legion—had survived the attack. When I'd reached him by phone, he'd described the scene as "a bloodbath."

Doc had been waiting at the motel for about six hours when a cargo van pulled up. The driver told him to get in. "That's all he said," Doc remembered. "I was, like, All right. Fuck it."

Half a dozen volunteers from South America crowded into the back with him. They were brought to an abandoned school and then, eventually, to the base in Yavoriv. Of the hundreds of foreigners who had been at the facility when it was hit, many had returned to Poland. According to my Canadian friend, this was for the best. Although some of the men had been "legit, values-driven, warrior-mentality" veterans, others were "shit": "gun nuts," "right-wing bikers," "ex-cops who are three hundred pounds." Two people

had accidentally discharged their weapons inside his tent in less than a week. A "chaotic" lack of discipline had been exacerbated by "a fair amount of cocaine."

The attack functioned as a filter. "It was almost comical to watch all these tough guys just shit themselves and run away," my friend said. By the time Doc reached Yavoriv, a higher proportion of the volunteers were committed fighters. The main branch of the Legion fell under the purview of the Ukrainian Army, but the G.U.R., the Defense Ministry's intelligence directorate, was also recruiting foreigners for specialized assignments. After an interview with a G.U.R. officer, Doc was placed on a thirteen-man team composed of Brazilians, Portuguese, Brits, and others. They were deployed to Sumy, in the north, to conduct reconnaissance on armored columns moving toward Kyiv.

In April, Russian forces retreated from northern Ukraine in order to concentrate on the Donbas, in the east. The G.U.R. sent Doc and his comrades to a region there called Donetsk. The fighting intensified. Over the spring and summer, two members of Doc's unit were killed and several injured. Others went home. When we met in Kyiv, his team had dwindled to five men, and the contraction reflected a broader trend. In March, Ukraine's Foreign Minister had stated that twenty thousand people, from fifty-two countries, had expressed interest in signing up for the International Legion. That month in Kyiv, I'd met numerous Americans and Europeans eager to join the war effort, and a room in the train station had been dedicated to welcoming such new arrivals. The Legion refuses to disclose how many members it now counts, but it is nowhere near twenty thousand.

Many foreigners, no matter how seasoned or élite, were unprepared for the reality of combat in Ukraine: the front line, which extends for roughly seven hundred miles, features relentless, industrial-scale violence of a type unknown in Europe since the Second World War. The ordeal of weathering modern artillery for extended durations is distinct from anything that Western soldiers faced in Iraq or Afghanistan (where they enjoyed a monopoly on such firepower). "Once you've been dropped on heavy—ninety per cent of people can't handle that, even if they're combat-experienced," Doc told me.

At our lunch, Doc seemed conflicted himself about whether he would continue fighting. Two weeks later, though, he decided to return to Donetsk. I asked to go with him. The Ukrainian military has been extraordinarily opaque about how it is executing the war, and journalistic embeds are almost nonexistent. Despite the historic magnitude of the conflict, our concept of the battlefield derives largely from brief, edited video clips released by the government or posted by soldiers.

The G.U.R., however, appeared to exercise a degree of independence, and, rather unexpectedly, it allowed me to accompany Doc.

It was a ten-hour drive to the town where Doc's team was based, not far from Pavlivka, a frontline village about fifty miles north of Mariupol. Most civilians had fled the area, and the landscape was now battered and pocked with craters. In May, the building where the foreigners had been living was struck by cluster munitions; a Portuguese fighter was gravely wounded, and shrapnel was lodged in Doc's right buttock. Their current quarters, in a quaint brick house on the bank of a stream overgrown with reeds, resembled less a military billet than a communal squat. A salvaged barbecue grill stood in the yard; socks and underwear dried on a line. Logs split by a hatchet fuelled a wood-burning stove.

Doc went into the basement, which was teeming with ammunition boxes, anti-tank weapons, and rocket launchers, and unfolded a mat on the concrete floor. Tai, a former member of the New Zealand Defense Force, and T.Q., a German who had served in the French Foreign Legion, also slept down there. Another Kiwi, called Turtle, and a U.S. Army veteran whose code name was Herring occupied the first floor. Several Ukrainians lived upstairs, and a motley entourage of dogs and cats roamed the property. We'd shown up at dinnertime. In a cramped kitchen decorated with elaborately patterned wallpaper, the men took turns heating instant noodles and washing dishes. Black tarp was taped over every window: even faint traces of light could attract the attention of Russian surveillance drones. Nearby blasts had shattered some of the panes, chipped the walls, and opened gaping holes in an adjacent field. By way of welcome, Turtle cheerfully assured me of the advantage of residing in the basement: if a Russian missile hit the house, the stockpiled ordnance would provide the mercy of an "instant death."

Turtle was the team's leader. He'd enlisted in the New Zealand Army in 2002, when he was seventeen, done a tour in Afghanistan, and gone on to work in multiple countries as a private security contractor. An ethnic Maori, he had a forceful, gregarious personality that balanced sober professionalism with bombastic humor. His room had been the homeowner's study, and later I found him sitting at a desk before a wall of books, writing on a notepad. He was planning the team's next mission. In 2014, Vladimir Putin had backed a separatist rebellion in the Donbas. After Russia launched a full-scale invasion, in February, its control of the region expanded to Pavlivka; the Ukrainians retook the village in June, and since then a stalemate had prevailed. Because of the rural terrain—open farmland interspersed with occasional towns—a breakthrough from either direction would require troops to traverse sprawling fields exposed to enemy fire. Both Russia and Ukraine had focussed their resources on more strategically vital theatres, so neither was equipped to mount such an offensive.

In lieu of major advances, the two sides vied to extend their presence by exploiting a network of parallel and perpendicular tree lines that divided up the no man's land, or "gray zone," between their fortified garrisons. "The tree lines offer concealment," Turtle explained. "Nothing else here offers that ability to skirt around." The team's primary responsibility in Donetsk was reconnaissance: sneaking through the underbrush, probing the gray zone, locating the forwardmost Russian trenches, and establishing new positions for Ukrainian troops to backfill.

But the tactic of using the foliage to obscure their movements, Turtle told me, was expiring: "The leaves are falling. In a month's time, there won't be anything left." Before that happened, he intended to secure one more tree line, which would give the Ukrainians a stronger footing from which to defend any winter assault on Pavlivka.

As Turtle described in granular detail various ridges, valleys, rivers, and roads, I was struck by how thoroughly he'd internalized the local geography. His family had been troubled, he said, when he'd begun referring to the town where we were as "home." In New Zealand, he'd been "planning out the rest of my life with a girl." Before coming to Ukraine, he'd ended the relationship, quit his job, and sold his house and car. "In hindsight, it was very selfish," he acknowledged. Although he may have suggested to his

friends and relatives that Russian atrocities—in the Kyiv suburb of Bucha and elsewhere—had instilled in him a sense of obligation, such moral posturing had been disingenuous. “It was just an excuse to be in this environment again,” Turtle said. If the “self-satisfaction” of testing his grit remained a factor, however, the months he’d spent in Ukraine had complicated his motives. “I actually do love these people and I love this country,” he said. “I can’t go home because *this* is home now. It really does feel that way.”

On one of the bookshelves, Turtle had lined up several hand grenades in front of a row of novels. I also noticed, hanging above the desk, a black tag with a barcode and the word “*dead*” on it.

I decided not to ask about it yet.

The first phase of the mission was to conduct aerial surveillance of the tree line—a duty that fell to the team’s thirty-year-old drone operator, Herring. After five years in the U.S. Army, Herring had become a deckhand on a purse seiner off the coast of Maine. He had the callused, knotty fingers typical of that trade, along with a shaved head and narrow, dark eyes that glinted with a readiness for mischief or danger. His nose had been slightly crooked since June, when it was broken in a blast in Kyiv.

In 2018, Herring had bought a drone and taught himself to locate schools of fish by tracking the whales and sharks that fed on them. When he realized that drones would play a role in Ukraine, he said, “it was hard to sit on the sidelines, knowing you could help.” He added that he had grown up in Illinois, and, “as a Midwestern dude, I’ve always hated Russia—the whole ‘Red Dawn’ thing.”

A few days after I arrived at the house, I accompanied Herring to a forward position within drone range of the target tree line. He was joined by Rambo, the leader of the Ukrainians who lived with the foreigners. The Ukrainians belonged to a reconnaissance company in the 72nd Mechanized Brigade, which was responsible for the area around Pavlivka, and to which the foreigners were officially attached. Rambo was thin and scrappy, with a sly grin that seldom broke into laughter. He’d served three years in the Ukrainian Army directly after graduating from high school, in 2005. As a

civilian, he'd been a pipe fitter for an engineering company that sent him to Europe, Africa, and the United States, where he'd learned rudimentary English.

Rambo and his men had moved in with Turtle's team in August, after their own house, next door, was bombed. As we headed to the front in two dilapidated vehicles, we passed one building after another that had also been destroyed. Incinerated cars sat on the roadside. Missiles and rockets had lodged in the fields, their protruding metal tubes resembling strange bionic crops. We parked in the dystopian ruins of a coal mine whose silos, conveyors, and concrete warehouses had been severely shelled. Another soldier from the 72nd then transported us in a van to a wide tree line running toward the gray zone, where an air shaft led into underground tunnels.

Above the shaft, a utility room had been converted into a makeshift command center. A few Ukrainians monitored radio traffic from the trenches. Herring began preparing two compact drones and several improvised munitions: explosive material packed into short metal pipes that had been augmented with fins made on 3-D printers. An inverted nail emerged from the head of each pipe, serving as a firing pin; the fins caused the pipe to spiral vertically, pushing the nail into a blasting cap on impact. Sometimes, Herring weaponized his drones with disposable plastic cups containing hand grenades. "It's a risky method, but it's a method," he said.

All across Ukraine, the proliferation of affordable, user-friendly drones has radically altered the battlefield. Herring had flown drones for hundreds of hours in Donetsk, dropping explosives on Russian positions and identifying enemy coördinates for Ukrainian artillery. Russian forces use commercial drones, too, but to a lesser extent. They rely more heavily on Orlans—military-grade, fixed-wing unmanned aerial vehicles that can be flown for longer periods of time. The limited battery life and transmission range of commercial drones preclude their pilots from operating them too remotely. Moreover, the pilots must avoid any type of shelter, such as a house or a bunker, where the signal might be obstructed.

This meant that Herring and Rambo needed to move forward from the air shaft. It was preferable to do so at night, both to mitigate their exposure and because one of the drones had a thermal camera, and spotting the heat

signatures of bodies and tanks was more difficult during the day. At around 8 *p.m.*, the men departed on foot, wearing night-vision devices. I followed, using a borrowed set.

In the grainy, green world of the phosphor screen, the stars gleamed like bioluminescent plankton. Herring and Rambo moved deliberately between the black silhouettes of trees, many of which had been splintered and contorted by artillery. I was looking at a tilled field to our left when a shimmering tail arced overhead, collided with another streaking light, and radiantly detonated. Herring said that it was a Russian missile intercepted by an anti-aircraft weapon.

We soon stopped advancing through the trees. While Rambo kneeled amid the deadwood, pulling security, Herring stepped out from under the canopy, draping a poncho over his head to hide the glow of his controller's monitor. The drone's four miniature rotors whirred into action, lifting it into the sky. Artillery whistled back and forth, over the field. After a while, I heard Herring curse.

"Jammers," he told Rambo.

The Russians and the Ukrainians employ two main countermeasures against each other's drones. One is a futuristic-looking contraption, fired like a rifle, whose transmissions force emergency landings. The other is a signal-jamming system that scrambles, over a broad zone, the satellite networks on which drones depend for navigation. Herring had run up against the latter, which had triggered an automatic response in his drone to race in the opposite direction, depleting its battery. He eventually retrieved it—correcting its course with small flicks of the joystick—and we returned to the air shaft. Although multi-rotor drones are relatively inexpensive, thermal ones are not, and Herring could not risk losing his.

Apart from their weapons, the foreigners had acquired much of their equipment on their own. Doc had bought helmets, scopes, binoculars, range finders, ear protection, ammo pouches, and other essential items for the team. Each night-vision device had cost thousands of dollars. T.Q. had traded a bottle of whiskey for American smoke grenades. Their two vehicles

—a pickup truck and an S.U.V., both Nissans—had been donated but were forever breaking down, requiring parts and repairs.

Back at the command center, a soft-spoken Ukrainian officer told Rambo the brigade had received information that the Russians were preparing an attack. Rambo nodded, and then the officer turned to Herring. For a moment, they regarded each other uncertainly. At first blush, Herring could seem abrasive. His booming voice was seldom modulated, his sense of humor often lewd. I wondered what the officer thought about this brash American.

He had just one question, it turned out: "You will fight with us?"

"Of course," Herring said.

The men clasped hands.

Trust between international volunteers and the Ukrainian military was crucial yet precarious. Language was an obvious hurdle. When Doc first rotated to Donetsk, a Portuguese team member whose parents were Ukrainian would translate from Ukrainian to Portuguese, which a Brazilian member would translate to Spanish, which an American member would translate to English. Each link in that chain had since left the country. Turtle had persuaded a Ukrainian friend who spoke English to come to Donetsk, but he was a civilian, and so he mostly stayed at the house.

Another persistent obstacle was the fact that both Ukraine and the Legion were constantly losing and replacing men. The 72nd Mechanized Brigade had assumed control of the area in August. Before that, the foreigners had worked with another brigade, the 53rd, which had fully integrated them into its operations and had furnished them with coveted Javelins. On near-daily missions, the team had pushed forward Ukrainian positions, ambushed enemy tanks, and planted mines behind Russian lines.

The 72nd had shown less interest in collaboration. Before coming to Pavlivka, the brigade had been stationed in Bakhmut, another city in Donetsk, where an enormous number of soldiers had died, and even more had been wounded. The trauma of Bakhmut had unnerved many of the survivors, and they now seemed wary of outsiders.

While the 72nd was settling in, Doc had gone on vacation, to the Spanish party island of Ibiza. Before his return, the team had undertaken to secure a tree line where, Herring's drone surveillance indicated, Russian soldiers occupied a trench system. The foreigners left Pavlivka late in the evening. Although they had briefed the 72nd on their route, a Ukrainian unit opened fire on them as they approached. The team shot back. "We won, they didn't," Turtle told me.

While the Ukrainians evacuated their casualties, the team proceeded with its mission. Turtle and Tai established a machine-gun position in a field; everybody else continued on foot. T.Q. and Herring were there, as were four Americans, a Frenchman called Nick, and a third Kiwi, Dominic Abelen. The men followed a trench until they came upon a complex of dugouts and bunkers full of Russian troops—far more than they had anticipated. Most were asleep or just waking up. A frenzied close-quarters fight ensued. Using rifles and grenades, the team killed at least a dozen soldiers. Turtle and Tai, from across the field, assailed additional Russians with the machine gun.

As the sun rose, and the foreigners lost the advantage of their night vision, they became overwhelmed. Abelen was shot in the head while attempting to withdraw from the trench. He died instantly. One of the Americans, a twenty-four-year-old Army veteran named Joshua Jones, was wounded in the thigh. A bullet pierced Nick's hindside. Another American, a former marine who went by Saint, was struck in his elbow and foot.

Jones, bleeding profusely, screamed for help. But Russian mortars had begun to zero in on the machine-gun position, and any effort to retrieve him or Abelen would have been suicidal. The team retreated, linked up with Turtle and Tai, and delivered Nick and Saint to a hospital. A round had smashed into Turtle's chest plate, and Herring found a bullet hole in the crotch of his pants. That afternoon, they attempted to return to the trench, but heavy shelling forced them back. When Herring flew a drone over the scene, the bodies were still there. Two days later, the Russians had collected them.

The debacle had further strained the team's rapport with the 72nd. No Ukrainians had died in the exchange of friendly fire, and Turtle didn't know how many had been injured, but he allowed, "That might be why some

people don't like us in this area anymore." The leeriness was mutual. Members of the brigade's reconnaissance company—with which the team was supposed to coördinate—had followed the foreigners partway through the tree line, and had agreed to provide additional backup if anything went wrong. Yet none of the Ukrainians had joined the battle with the Russians. (One of them later told me that their radio had malfunctioned and they had not heard the team's call for help.)

"There's always gonna be some soreness there," Turtle said. While other Legion members were less restrained about their frustration, Turtle hewed to a philosophical detachment that I came to appreciate as central to his efficacy as a soldier. "Until then, we'd been lucky," he told me. "And our luck ran out that night." He was most concerned about the fallout *within* his team. After Jones and Abelen were killed, fear and trepidation had crept in, eroding the unit's esprit de corps. Shaking his head at the memory, Turtle said of the trench, "I don't know if we ever got out of that thing."

The acting commander of the Ukrainian reconnaissance company, code-named Grek, was a thirty-year-old historian who had written a doctoral thesis on ancient Thebes. He and his men (with the exception of Rambo's group) were stationed in another house in town, a short drive away. As an undergraduate at Kyiv University, in 2012 and 2013, Grek had spent one day a week attending a reserve-officer-training-corps program. At the time, a year of military service was mandatory in Ukraine, and many young academics opted to earn their commissions rather than be conscripted. When Putin launched his campaign to take Kyiv, Grek was assigned to the reconnaissance company, which was then commanded by an experienced older officer. After the ferocious combat in Bakhmut, the unit was reduced from a hundred and twenty-eight men to eighty-two. Grek and his superior both suffered concussions in an artillery strike, and the latter never fully recovered; shortly after Grek was released from the hospital, he was temporarily put in charge of the company. A month later, when the 72nd rotated to Pavlivka, another experienced officer was sent to relieve Grek. But the day after the officer arrived he was fatally wounded by a Russian shell.

When I noted the irony of Grek's becoming an officer to avoid military service, only to end up a frontline commander, he said, "Times change,

people change." Nevertheless, he retained the languid demeanor of a scholar. His posture was hunched, his expression one of aloof amusement. "I'm not a professional soldier," he told me more than once.

Two days after Herring's drone mission, Turtle and Grek visited the same tree line. Turtle wanted to create new positions there, deeper into the gray zone, which would offer better angles for fire support during the impending operation. Grek was unconvinced that the benefit warranted the risk, and they had agreed to take a look, together, at the forwardmost trench.

On our way to the coal mine, Grek asked Turtle, "You stay the winter?"

Turtle laughed. "Yeah, that's when all the fun happens."

"Crazy man. I'll probably go to New Zealand."

"We'll change passports—you go to New Zealand, I'll stay here."

We switched to a four-wheel-drive truck at the mine, and Turtle and I rode in the bed as it followed muddy tracks past the air shaft with the command center. When the truck could go no farther, we walked. Rain made the ground a slippery morass. After a while, we reached a Ukrainian encampment with a few soldiers, hand-dug foxholes, and a fire pit under camouflage netting. Grek was talking to an infantryman with gray stubble and glasses when a shell crashed in the fields. We took cover in a shallow bunker reinforced with logs and scrap lumber. A rusty pot sat over dead coals; an archaic telephone was connected to a wire that ran back to the air shaft. The bespectacled man introduced himself as Grandpa. He was a fifty-four-year-old farmer who had not left the encampment for two and a half months.

When the artillery subsided, Grek and Turtle resumed moving up the tree line. The path dropped into a narrow trench, and, after slogging through ankle-deep water for ten minutes or so, we arrived at the terminus. A middle-aged soldier was posted there; as he and Grek spoke in Ukrainian, Turtle filmed them with a GoPro mounted on his helmet. (Later, at the house, his friend would translate the exchange for him.)

“Everything beyond here is mined and booby-trapped with trip wires,” the soldier warned Grek. “Some of our guys were already blown up.”

“We’ll go with de-miners,” Grek said.

“They already tried. That’s who was blown up.”

There were other dangers: the tree line narrowed and thinned significantly, offering scant protection, and it sloped into a defilade, ceding the high ground to Russian snipers. “It’s not a good idea to go down there,” the soldier said. “I’m telling you like it is.”

“A lot of mines,” Grek said, in English.

Turtle shrugged. “We’re going. That’s just happening.”

On our way back, we stopped at another Ukrainian encampment, where a soldier with a digital tablet pulled up drone images and provided a detailed overview of the proximate Russian positions, their likely directions of attack, and how to defend against them.

“You’re the commander of this zone?” Grek asked.

“Me?” the soldier said. “I’m just a dancer.”

His name was Vitaliy, and before the war he’d belonged to a Ukrainian folk-dance ensemble.

Many of the professional soldiers in the 72nd had been killed or injured in Bakhmut. Conscripts had replenished the ranks. Some had attended a three-week basic infantry course in the U.K., with instructors from across Europe, but most had received only minimal training before being given Kalashnikovs and dispatched to the front. I had watched Turtle and the team train several dozen Ukrainians in close-quarters battle, or C.Q.B., a foundational doctrine among Western militaries for urban combat: how to enter rooms, move as a squad, shoot from windows. The Ukrainians were unaccustomed to handling rifles or wearing body armor, and, when Turtle asked if any of them were familiar with C.Q.B., only one raised his hand.

At the same time, the team had learned from the Ukrainians, especially when it came to the historical anachronism of trench warfare. Once, while the foreigners were visiting a trench that came under heavy bombardment, they had scrambled into a foxhole that was eight feet deep, in an L shape, with stairs and a roof of felled timber. For the next five hours, as Russian tank rounds and mortars burst around them, they had shared the shelter with an older infantryman who had been fighting in the Donbas since 2014. T.Q., the German who'd served in the French Foreign Legion, told me, "If he hadn't had the experience and taken the time to dig out that position—with enough space not only for himself but also for other people—we would have had casualties."

Staying alive in a Ukrainian trench requires a daunting combination of stamina, vigilance, and luck. The daily misery induces a mental fatigue that dulls alertness and subverts morale. But even the most disciplined soldier, with the most elaborate foxhole, can fall victim to a well-aimed munition, and the menace of sudden death plagues every Ukrainian infantryman charged with the imperative, terrible job of holding the line.

Before we left the encampment where Vitaliy, the dancer, was stationed, I gave him my card. He later texted me a photo of himself onstage, brandishing a sword in Cossack garb. It was an image, in more ways than one, of another world and another time. When I checked in on Vitaliy a few weeks later, he was in the hospital: a tank round had landed in his dugout, wounding him and killing a comrade.

I expressed my condolences, and Vitaliy replied, "Yes, but this is war." He planned to return to the front as soon as possible.

When Turtle and I got back to the house, there was news. The remains of Joshua Jones had been recovered, as part of a prisoner exchange in the southern region of Zaporizhzhia. CNN had aired footage of the handover which showed Ukrainian forensic investigators, in biohazard suits, carrying a body bag and a white flag away from a group of Russian soldiers. The U.S. State Department had announced that Jones would "soon be returned" to his home town, in Tennessee.

The team's reaction was subdued, which confused me. When I retired to the basement, I found Tai, the former New Zealand Defense Force member, lying on his mat with one of the cats purring on his chest. Since I had arrived, Tai had been the hardest team member to draw out. The twenty-nine-year-old son of Chinese immigrants, he was sleeved in tattoos that included, on his right hand, a five-petal orchid—the symbol of his family's native Hong Kong. "Tai" was a facetious reference to Taiwan, which many volunteers believed would be attacked by an emboldened China unless Russia was humiliated in Ukraine.

After some stilted small talk, I brought up Jones, and asked Tai whether he felt any sense of closure.

"I'm concerned about my mate," Tai said. He meant Dominic Abelen, whose body remained in Russian custody. Tai had known Abelen since 2017, when they served together in Iraq. After Tai and Turtle joined the International Legion, in August, Abelen requested that the G.U.R. assign them to Donetsk.

The two Kiwis both spoke of Abelen with reverence, describing him as an expert soldier whose courage and enthusiasm had been a reliable source of inspiration for his comrades. Before the unit had left the house on Abelen's final mission, he'd given Turtle the black tag, marked "*dead*," that I'd noticed in Turtle's room. It was a digital I.D. that New Zealanders carry with them on deployments. "You'll need that," Abelen had joked.

After Abelen was killed, Tai had informed the G.U.R. that he was going home. He spent a week in a hotel in Kyiv and bought a bus ticket to Poland. The morning that he was to leave, however, he returned to Donetsk. He'd joined the Legion to escape his "mundane and boring" life in New Zealand, he told me, where he'd worked as a mail carrier since being discharged from the Army. In the end, the prospect of resuming that existence had been more intimidating than staying in Ukraine. "I knew that, as soon as I got home, there's nothing there I'd rather do," he said. "So I came back."

The contract that international fighters sign with the government in Kyiv makes them Ukrainian soldiers and grants them the same benefits accorded to local troops: medical care, a base salary of about twelve hundred dollars a

month (with additional pay for hazardous duty), and legal-combatant status under the Geneva Conventions (though Russia considers them mercenaries ineligible for prisoner-of-war status). The critical difference is that foreigners are free to leave when they want. They can also refuse to carry out specific requests or tasks. Everything they do is voluntary.

To a civilian, this may sound appealing. But any service member knows that such an arrangement not only contradicts the basic premise on which functioning militaries are built; it also imposes an oppressive burden on individual soldiers. On our way to Donetsk, Doc had explained to me, “In the Marines, it didn’t matter what shit you threw at us,” because disobeying orders was never an option. He attributed the Legion’s high attrition rate to the stress of having to constantly choose whether to participate in risky missions: “It’s a cumulative effect. It stacks up in your mind.”

Similarly, whereas Doc’s tours in Iraq and Afghanistan had scheduled end dates, Legion members must decide for themselves when to stop fighting. The fact that Ukrainians like Rambo and Grek lack such agency makes quitting all the more fraught. Doc agreed with President Zelensky’s assertion that the war was about much more than just Ukraine—that no less than the future of democracy might be governed by its outcome. “And this is the problem,” he told me. “Because how am I different from these Ukrainian soldiers, then, if I believe that?”

Five days after the soft-spoken officer at the air shaft warned Herring and Rambo of a looming attack, Russian forces mounted a multi-pronged armored offensive. From the house, we could hear a major spike in artillery, cluster bombs, and tank fire. Ukrainian helicopters shuttled overhead. Rockets dragged contrails across the sky. Turtle received word that the Ukrainians in the trenches we had visited—where I’d met Grandpa and Vitaliy—had destroyed two tanks, using shoulder-fired weapons. A larger Russian contingent, however, had captured a southern neighborhood of Pavlivka.

Turtle gathered the team outside. “It might be a day where nothing happens, it might be a day where everything happens,” he said. Then he turned to Doc. “Are you in this?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Doc said.

Grek, the reconnaissance-company commander, advised the team to report to the battalion headquarters in Vuhledar, the next Ukrainian-held town after Pavlivka. The foreigners left in their two Nissans, while Rambo and his men followed in a Hyundai that a network of friends and relatives had bought for them. The main route was exposed to Russian tanks, so we had to travel off-road. Rockets were clobbering Vuhledar. We parked outside an apartment tower, and the men hustled into the stairwell. Turtle and Rambo went to find the headquarters.

There was no electricity, heat, or working plumbing in Vuhledar, and the only remaining tenant in the building appeared to be a middle-aged woman in a shabby coat and a tracksuit, named Lena. Alcohol seemed to have enhanced her delight at having guests.

“Where do you want to go?” she asked. “I can tell you the way. I’ve lived here since I was two.” Herring gave her a cigarette, and Lena gestured for him to light it. “I’m a lady,” she said.

An extended salvo shook the building. One shell screamed into a playground across the street, throwing up a splash of flame and dirt. Shrapnel tinked against the concrete walls.

“Well, they found our vehicles,” Herring said.

When Turtle and Rambo reappeared, they informed the team that the battalion commander wanted them to remain in Vuhledar on standby. It was the same story the next day, and the next: driving to Lena’s building and waiting in her stairwell, only to be sent home. By the third night, the team was bitterly demoralized. I found Rambo and Turtle in the kitchen, sharing a bottle of whiskey. “Three days, we just suck fucking Chupa Chups,” Rambo said.

“We’re trying to make something happen,” Turtle replied.

Soldiers in other companies had been sending Rambo videos of dramatic firefights and attacks on Russian tanks. “They kill a lot of guys in this time

we sit in fucking Vuhledar," he lamented.

"We're stuck," Turtle agreed. "But we can get out of it."

The next day, he drove to Vuhledar with only his friend who served as an interpreter. Returning to the house, Turtle summoned Rambo's men and his. "We have a mission," he told them.

The 72nd had assessed that six hundred enemy troops and thirty armored vehicles had entered Pavlivka. The village was divided between Russian forces in the southern neighborhoods and Ukrainian forces in the northern ones, though the fronts were fluid and ambiguous. The center of the village could be accessed by a tree line from the east, and the brigade wanted the foreigners to see if it was possible to traverse its length, or how far they could go before encountering Russian positions.



Cartoon by Edward Steed

Share

Link copied

Shop

On a whiteboard in the living room, Turtle drew a map. The team would travel by vehicle to a collection of summer cottages, or dachas, across a river from Pavlivka. Once it was dark, Turtle, Doc, T.Q., Rambo, and another Ukrainian would depart from there on foot, pass over a bridge, and enter the

tree line. Herring would remain in one of the dachas to provide real-time intelligence from his drone, identifying any Russian soldiers, tanks, or artillery that might attack the team. If all went well, they'd be home before dawn.

Tai's name did not appear on the whiteboard. When the others visited a firing range to rehearse their movements and practice shooting with night vision and thermal optics, he didn't participate. "Tai's out," Turtle told me. There was no animus in his voice, and indeed the team seemed to be going out of its way to reassure Tai.

I rode back from the range with Doc. During the rehearsal, he'd been the point man, a dangerous and demanding responsibility when navigating hostile, unfamiliar terrain littered with mines. "It's not what I came here to do, but it's what needs to be done," Doc said. When he joined the Legion, he'd assumed that the Ukrainians would use him in an engineering or communications role. It wasn't just that he had worked at Google. His tours in Iraq and Afghanistan had taken a toll on his body, and in 2021 he had broken both knees and fractured a vertebra during a paramotor accident in the Hudson Valley. "I thought I was too old and too broke to fight," he said. Nonetheless, he hadn't protested when the G.U.R. recruited him for the reconnaissance team. Knowing little about such techniques, he'd scoured the Internet for manuals and studied them on his phone. Still, he was not a natural—not like Dominic Abelen, who'd been the point man on every mission until he was killed. "He was so careful," Doc said. "You want someone who's obsessive to a fault." Combat was fast and frenetic, reconnaissance painstaking and slow. You took a few steps, then stopped and listened. You had to diligently suppress a powerful instinct, amplified by adrenaline and nerves, to speed up. "That's not me," Doc said.

When we'd met in Kyiv, he'd been working on pivoting from frontline operations to safer projects, such as fund-raising. "But, at the end of the day, I'm still a soldier," he said. In any war, the abstract or ideological reasons that lead someone to take up arms often dissolve in the highly personal crucible of combat, which produces its own logic. A desire for revenge can take hold, or a need for redemption, or an addiction to risk. Doc seemed to be contending with a sense of guilt. "The most shit I've ever felt about anything in this war," he'd told me, was being absent when Abelen and

Jones were killed. “When two of your guys die and you’re sitting on a beach in Ibiza . . .” He’d trailed off, grimacing.

The team left the house the following afternoon. A photographer and I rode in the Hyundai with Herring and a Ukrainian soldier called Pan. On the way, Herring stuck his hand in a pocket and brought out a yellow rubber duck. In March, he said, he’d distributed clothing to displaced civilians arriving at the train station in Kyiv. He’d given a jacket to a young boy, who reciprocated with the duck. The boy explained that it had helped him survive the siege of Mariupol. “He said that it would keep me safe,” Herring said, his jokey façade falling away.

We joined the rest of the team in an abandoned dacha riddled with holes. Other soldiers from the 72nd were also staging there, preparing to enter Pavlivka with about a dozen anti-tank weapons. Artillery was landing close; we could hear the clatter of small arms not far off. In a disarrayed living room, Doc tried to lighten the mood, speculating about the calibre of the projectiles outside.

T.Q. reclined on a couch, looking sombre. At twenty-five, he was the team’s youngest member, the only one who neither drank nor smoked, and generally the most serious, with a stereotypical German reserve. After studying chemistry at college for two semesters, he had asked himself, “Do I want to waste four years of my life for a piece of paper that validates an increase of salary?” He’d enlisted in the French Foreign Legion and deployed to Iraq. In Ukraine, T.Q. had preceded Turtle as team leader. Although T.Q. was universally admired for his meticulous pragmatism, after Abelen and Jones were killed everyone had agreed to make a change. Since then, according to Turtle, T.Q. had sometimes chafed at his loss of control. The previous day, he’d posed pointed questions about the plan that Turtle had outlined on the whiteboard. He worried, above all, that the team lacked clear lines of communication with the Ukrainian forces in Pavlivka.

“You all right, man?” Doc asked him in the dacha.

T.Q. shrugged.

The night before, Doc had told me, “If we do our job correctly, they’ll never know we were there.” He’d then qualified the assurance. The trees were almost bare, the roads carpeted with leaves. An Orlan, the Russian fixed-wing drone, would have “perfect observation.” Ultimately, Doc said, it was “a game of chance.”

More and more members of the 72nd were congregating at the dacha, and Herring and Pan, the Ukrainian soldier, decided to station themselves elsewhere. As the photographer and I followed them, along a dirt lane dotted with small homes, all of which had been partially demolished, something whistled toward us—loud and fast. We dove into the mud, then got up and ran. Arriving at a larger, gated property, we entered a foyer, and as Herring shut the door behind us another shell slammed to earth, blasting shrapnel against the walls.

The foyer was full of glass and debris. Floral-patterned drapes hung over a shattered window. A door leading to the next room was barricaded shut by rubble on the other side. I was relieved to see a hole in the floor with a wooden ladder descending to a root cellar. When the photographer and I climbed down, we found that the shelter was too shallow to stand in.

The rest of the team, still at the original dacha, waited for night to fall. Then Turtle radioed that they were heading out. He had substituted himself for Doc as the point man, and had secured a member of the 72nd to guide them around Ukrainian mines.

Herring went into the yard of the gated property, draped a blanket over his head, and launched the drone. Soon, a renewed barrage pounded the neighborhood. The photographer and I hunkered down in the root cellar. After one incoming strike, I could hear Pan, in the foyer, shout, “Herring O.K.?” It seemed insane to me that Herring was still outside. Only after a giant explosion brought chunks of ceiling crashing into the foyer did he and Pan join us under the floor.

“That’s the closest it’s ever come to hitting me,” Herring marvelled. He’d managed to land the drone in the yard, but had sprinted inside before he could retrieve it. He’d also lost his radio. Borrowing Pan’s, Herring said, “Turtle, this is Herring.”

There was a long pause. Then: “This is Doc. Be advised, we’re taking fire.” As soon as the team had crossed the bridge, Ukrainian troops in a dugout on the Pavlivka side of the river had warned them that an Orlan had spotted them. The team had decided to continue the mission but had quickly become pinned down.

“Roger that, Doc,” Herring said. “We’re taking near-direct hits on this house. I had a good visual on you guys. I just landed.”

“Roger. We’re taking what seems like tank fire. Over.”

“Roger that. About the same story here. I got a good scan of that tree line. I saw zero, I repeat zero, signatures along it.”

Doc asked Herring to locate the Russian tank. “It’s coming about ten degrees from the left,” he said.

“I gotta wait for this to subside to run out and grab the drone,” Herring told him.

Another strike near the house made Doc’s response inaudible.

“I gotta get that drone,” Herring said. If he could pinpoint the location of the tank, Rambo could transmit its coördinates to the 72nd Brigade, which could neutralize it with artillery.

It was pitch-black in the cellar. Even when three of us sat with our knees drawn up, the fourth person could fit only by standing next to the ladder. In the claustrophobic space, I could feel Herring debating what to do. He was lighting a cigarette when a loud whooshing noise, like a cascade of water, roared toward us. “Down!” Herring barked, though there was nowhere farther down to go. I bowed my head and pressed my palms into the dirt floor, which quaked as three successive impacts left a ringing in my ears.

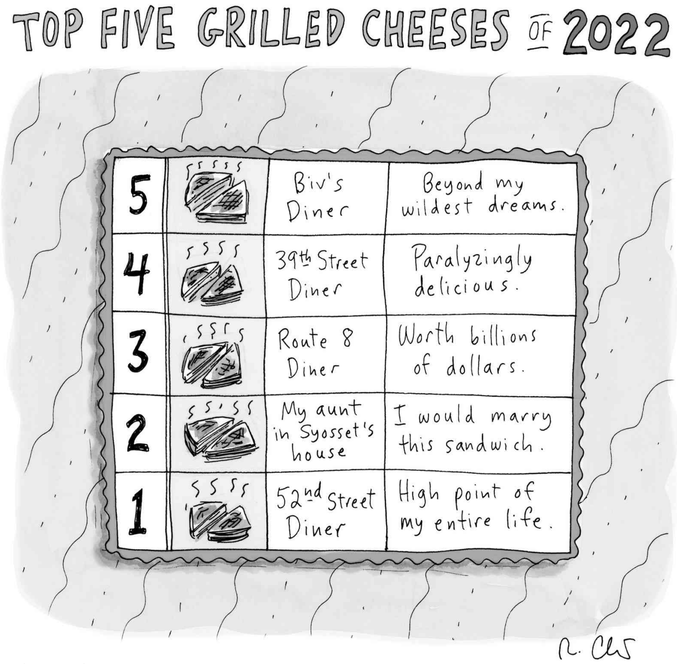
“Fucking dildos,” Herring said.

It was unclear whether we, too, were being deliberately targeted. I had recently interviewed an American who was teaching Ukrainians in the south to identify Russian drone pilots by tracing the signal of their controllers. But

Herring said that this method worked only on a Chinese brand of drones favored by the Russians; his drone was made by a different company and not susceptible to such tracking.

“I think they’re just hitting the whole area,” he surmised.

The next blast was the biggest yet. Above us, wood and plaster broke and tumbled down; the windows of other houses burst.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Share

Link copied

Shop

“We’ll be all right, boys,” Herring said. He sparked his lighter and held the flame under his face to show us that he was smiling. At first, I was annoyed by what seemed like a juvenile display of bravado. Then I realized that

Herring was trying to put the photographer and me at ease. “I feel safe!” he said, as half a dozen more shells detonated outside.

Doc came over the radio. The Russian tank was homing in on them. He said of the rounds, “They’re walking up the tree line. The next one will likely be on us. So please try to find it.”

“We’re getting stuffed up here pretty good right now,” Herring told him. When Doc didn’t answer, Herring said again, “I gotta get that drone.” Another munition rocked the house. Somewhere, a machine gun had begun to fire. I urged Herring not to go outside.

“Yeah, but they need me,” he said. “Like, if I don’t do this . . .” He picked up the radio. “Doc, this is Herring.”

No answer. A few seconds later, thirteen rockets, some landing almost simultaneously, caused more of the house to crumble.

“Fuck!” Herring said.

Finally, Turtle came over the radio. “How much luck have you had with the flying?” he asked. “Are you finding out where the issue is?”

“Every time I try to get up out of this basement, we’re taking rounds pretty much right on top of this house,” Herring told him.

Turtle seemed not to have heard. “We are under pretty heavy shelling,” he said. “Try and find where it’s coming from. I know it’s a hard ask, but if you can it would be good for our counter-battery.”

“Roger that, Turtle. I’m trying.”

“Do your best, mate.”

During a brief lull in the high-pitched whizzing and booming thunderclaps of tank rounds, rockets, and artillery, Herring muttered, as much to himself as to anyone, “All right. I’m gonna get real low, crawl through the house, and make a mad dash for the drone, I guess.” Going up the ladder, he added, “If something happens, don’t come outside. I’ll find my way in.”

The drone was where he’d left it, apparently intact. Herring got it in the air, but before he could spot the tank the camera came loose, rendering it inoperative. Guided only by a digital map on the controller and by the sound of the rotors, he brought the drone back to the yard. When he returned to the house, he discovered that the drone’s camera mount had been damaged in one of the blasts.

“She’s fucked,” he said.



“I made it myself.”
Cartoon by David Sipress

Share

Link copied

Shop

I climbed into the foyer. A fresh layer of debris was strewn across the floor, and when I looked up I saw that all the laths on the ceiling were exposed. On the controller, Herring showed me thermal footage of the team: each man a

small black speck in the long gray tree line. They still had a ways to go, and now there was nothing for us to do but wait.

Forty-five minutes later, Doc informed Herring that they were returning to the dacha. It was too soon for them to have completed the mission, and Herring fretted that someone might have stepped on a mine. This wasn't the case, though: the bombardment had convinced them that the Russians were tracking them, and Turtle had decided to abort.

When we ran back to the Hyundai, we found that its rear window had been blown out. Rambo arrived at the same time as us. It was 10:30 *p.m.* Headlights would have been like beacons for the Russians, so Herring covered the dashboard with a tarp and Rambo drove through the dark using his night-vision device. The others followed in the pickup. As Rambo turned into a rutted black field, Herring asked if everyone was O.K.

"We're alive," Rambo said.

At the house, Doc looked like a different person. His eyes were bright and tense, his face smeared with sweat and grime. Even his speech was unnaturally animated. He emanated a kind of physical energy that, in another context, might have suggested mania or narcotics. "It's endorphins," Doc said.

Turtle told me that he'd been "one hundred per cent" certain that they were going to die. I talked to him more about this the next day. Throughout my two weeks with the team, I'd been struck by what seemed to be a fatalistic anticipation of his own death. The "*dead*" tag that Dominic Abelen had given him was just one example. Turtle regularly made comments such as "When it's your time, it's your time," "I wake up every morning ready to see the big guy in the sky," and "I've had a good life, I can die happy." When I asked him to relate his mind-set in the tree line, he said, "There was not a thought of regret. I was, like, It's been a great ride. No tears. It was just acceptance. Like, Wow, here I am."

He'd once told me that many volunteers who quit the Legion did so because they hadn't been honest with themselves about their reasons for coming to Ukraine. "Because when you get here your reason will be tested," Turtle

said. “And if it’s something weak, something that’s not real, you’re going to find out.” He was dubious of foreigners who claimed to want to help Ukraine. Turtle wanted to help, too, of course, but that impulse was not enough; it might get you to the front, but it wouldn’t keep you there.

I asked what was keeping *him* there.

“In the end, it’s just that I love this shit,” he said. “And maybe I can’t escape that—maybe that’s the way it’s always gonna be.”

The photographer and I left for Kyiv the next morning. Tai came with us. So did Doc, who was flying to New York to attend a Veterans Day gala, where he hoped to solicit donations. Herring also caught a ride. He had a girlfriend in Bucha, whom he’d met on a dating app, and he was due for a visit. T.Q. was staying—but not for long. In his logical fashion, he had concluded that he could be more of an asset to the team if he spoke Ukrainian, and, given his linguistic aptitude—he was fluent in German, English, and French—he’d decided to take classes in Kyiv.

We were loading up our bags when Rambo received a call from Grek. A Russian armored unit was pushing on another tree line near the coal mine, and the infantry troops there needed backup. As we left the house, Rambo, Pan, and Turtle were donning their gear. That night, while I was in Kyiv, Turtle texted me a GoPro video: the three of them bounding through a cratered field, emptying their magazines, bullets zinging past them, a shell sending up a shower of dirt. When I called him, he said that they had been forced to pull back from the tree line but that no one had been hurt.

I asked if they would be returning.

“I fucking hope so, mate,” Turtle said.

Three days later, members of a Russian brigade that was leading the Pavlivka offensive published a letter alleging that about three hundred of their troops had been killed, wounded, or captured, and that half their armored vehicles had been destroyed. In an unprecedented public rebuke, the brigade members called the decision to invade Pavlivka “incomprehensible,” denouncing their commanders for treating them like

"meat." Despite the uproar over casualties, Russia plowed ahead with its offensive, and the 72nd Brigade eventually withdrew from the village. The defeat marked the largest loss of territory for Ukraine since the summer. Russian shelling of Vuhledar has subsequently intensified, imperilling it as well. Now that the trees in Donetsk are without leaves, it is unlikely that the Ukrainians will be able to reoccupy any of their surrendered trenches before the spring. Although Ukrainian forces recently liberated Kherson, a major port city on the Black Sea, the trench and artillery warfare being waged in the Donbas shows no sign of relenting. The grinding stalemate in Bakhmut continues to inflict a horrific toll on both sides, with little ground lost or won.

On November 10th, General Mark Milley, the U.S. chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, estimated that Russia and Ukraine had each sustained "well over" a hundred thousand casualties since February—a staggering number, if true. The International Legion declines to say how many foreigners have been killed or wounded. After the prisoner exchange in Zaporizhzhia, the Ukrainian government announced that it was holding Joshua Jones's remains as part of a war-crimes investigation. Jones's father, Jeff, a U.S. Army veteran of the Gulf War and a retired police officer, told me that he had identified his son in a photograph, and that the corpse had been "charred." He was awaiting the results of an autopsy that would indicate whether Jones had been alive when his body was burned. Jeff said that he had spoken to Joshua on the phone in the weeks before his death, and that "he seemed content over there, like he finally found his place in the world."

A few days after I spoke with Turtle, Rambo sent me a video of himself with a bandage over his face and his right hand bundled in a splint. The Hyundai had come under fire near the coal mine, sending him careering into a ditch. A couple of weeks later, Herring was riding in a truck through the dachas when a shell landed in the road. When he regained consciousness, the truck was on its side and wrapped around a tree. Herring climbed through a shattered window but lacked the strength to stand. The next time he woke up, a Ukrainian was slapping him in the face and he could hear muffled explosions. He was evacuated to a hospital in Dnipro, where he was told that he had four broken ribs and a punctured lung. His face and torso were covered with lacerations. When he called me from his room, which he was

sharing with multiple wounded Ukrainians, he credited his rubber duck with having saved his life. “Either the duck or my helmet,” Herring quipped.

Tai, the Kiwi who quit the Legion, did not have a change of heart this time. His only regret, he told me, was leaving Ukraine without Dominic Abelen’s body, which he had hoped to escort to New Zealand. That was why he’d stuck around as long as he had. But, he said, “I realized that if I stay I’ll probably die as well, waiting for him.”

When New Zealand soldiers are killed overseas, their units welcome home their caskets with a haka—the ceremonial Maori dance. Turtle and Tai plan to lobby for Abelen to receive the same honor. If they succeed, the casket will be brought to his former unit’s parade grounds, in Christchurch, through a wooden gate decorated with traditional carvings, called a waharoa. Abelen’s comrades will stomp their feet, beat their chests, and stick out their tongues. Each battalion in the New Zealand Army has its own haka, with its own words that the soldiers hiss and bellow. The name of the haka that Abelen’s unit will perform translates as “We Are Ready.”

After attending the Veterans Day gala in New York, Doc went back to Kyiv, where he plans to buy an apartment. He is currently raising funds to produce and distribute an innovative overhead-protection system for Ukrainian troops deployed in frontline trenches.

More than any other foreign volunteer I met, Doc seemed to be genuinely motivated by a conviction that the conflict was “a clear case of right and wrong.” I sometimes wondered to what extent his desire to participate in such an unambiguously just war was connected to his previous military career. The cause for which he is fighting in Ukraine is righteous because it consists of one country resisting occupation by another. But Doc’s adversaries in Iraq and Afghanistan viewed their causes similarly—and, in Afghanistan, that galvanizing sentiment may be why the Taliban prevailed. This is a thorny topic for veterans, and Doc was not willing to concede a moral equivalence between the U.S. and Russian invasions. However, the experience of defending a country against an outside aggressor that was superior in numbers and in firepower had given him a new appreciation for his former enemies. “I used to think, What kind of pussy fights with mines?” he said. “And here I am, laying mines.”

I also suspected another appeal in Ukraine for International Legion members. During my lunch with Doc on Andriyivsky Descent, in October, I'd been unexpectedly moved when the old man in the fedora thanked him for his service. I shared Doc's discomfort with similar gestures Stateside, but something here was different. Although the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan were transformative for those who fought in them, they had no real impact on most Americans and Europeans. Everyone in Ukraine, by contrast, has been affected by the Russian invasion; everyone has sacrificed and suffered. For some foreign veterans, such a country, so thoroughly reshaped and haunted by war, must feel less alien than home. ♦

By Susan B. Glasser

By Keith Gessen

By Robert Moor

By Lauren Collins

Above & Beyond

- **Three Kings Day Parade and Celebration Is Back**

Three Kings Day Parade and Celebration Is Back

Everyone is welcome to join El Museo del Barrio's hour-long procession, on Jan. 6, now in its forty-sixth year.



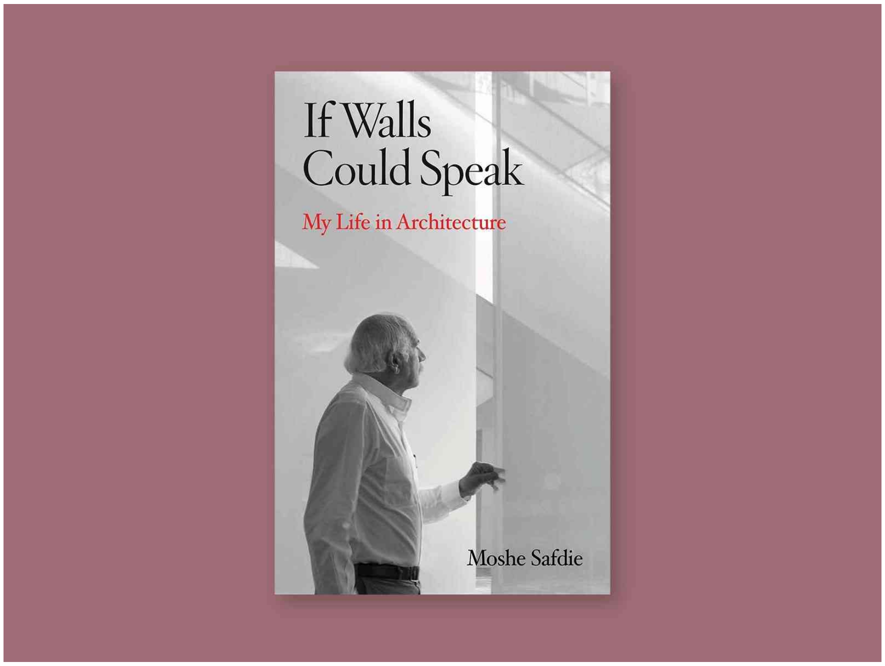
After skipping two years, for obvious reasons, a beloved holiday tradition is back in the streets of East Harlem—El Museo del Barrio's **Three Kings Day Parade and Celebration,** which is now in its forty-sixth year. Some revellers show up dressed as the wise men, but there are other Biblical trios: look for fresh faces self-styled as la Sagrada Família (pictured above, in 2020). Everyone is welcome to join the hour-long procession, which begins at 11 *A.M.,* on Jan. 6, but registration, via elmuseo.org, is required.

By Paul Elie

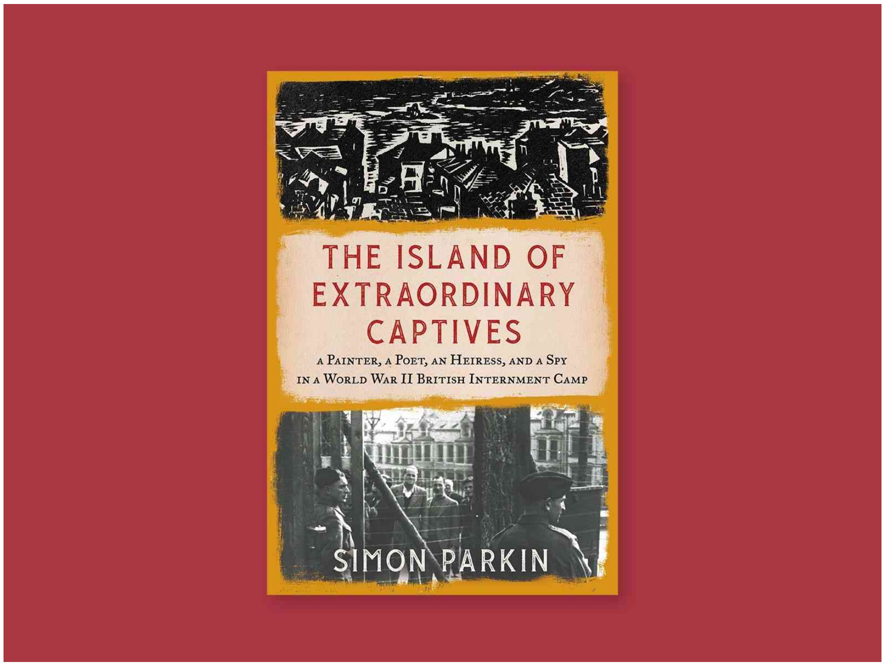
By Patrick Berry

Books

- **Briefly Noted**



If Walls Could Speak, *by Moshe Safdie (Atlantic Monthly)*. This richly detailed autobiography by the renowned architect weaves together memoir, a tour of select projects, and philosophical meditations. Born in Haifa in 1938, Safdie moved to Canada with his family when he was a teen-ager, and attained success at a young age: his master’s thesis, a system of modular housing units, was realized as Montreal’s Habitat 67 residential complex. It brought together many of his lasting preoccupations, including access to nature and high urban density. Safdie’s reflections on his other projects, which range from Jerusalem’s Holocaust History Museum—a structure built into a mountain, “cutting through like a spike”—to Singapore’s Marina Bay Sands, combine intellectual convictions with intuitions about the effects of space, light, sound, earth, and water, illuminating the impulses that have shaped his revolutionary works.

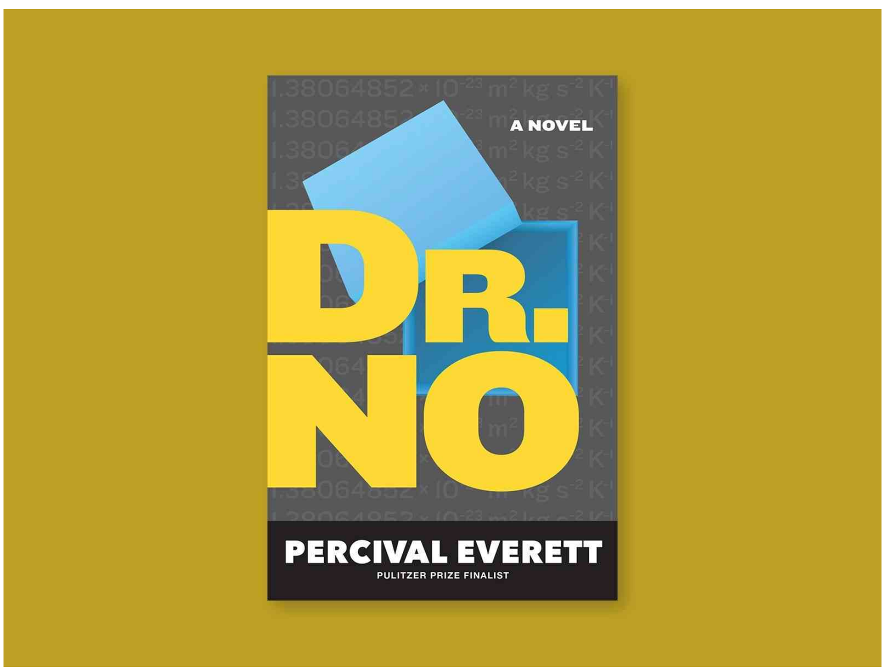


The Island of Extraordinary Captives, *by Simon Parkin (Scribner)*. Between 1940 and 1945, as Great Britain warded off a Nazi invasion, it imposed a cruel irony at home: fearing domestic German sympathizers, authorities imprisoned thousands of "enemy aliens"—many of them Jewish refugees who had fled Hitler's persecution. Parkin, a *New Yorker* contributing writer, focusses on a camp on the Isle of Man, where the internees included scholars, engineers, and artists who forged a miniature society, with lectures, soccer matches, theatre performances, and even a debate society. Parkin's account, with its well-chosen central figures and attention to the trauma that some of the imprisoned carried for decades, is testimony to human fortitude despite callous, hypocritical injustice.

The Best Books of 2022

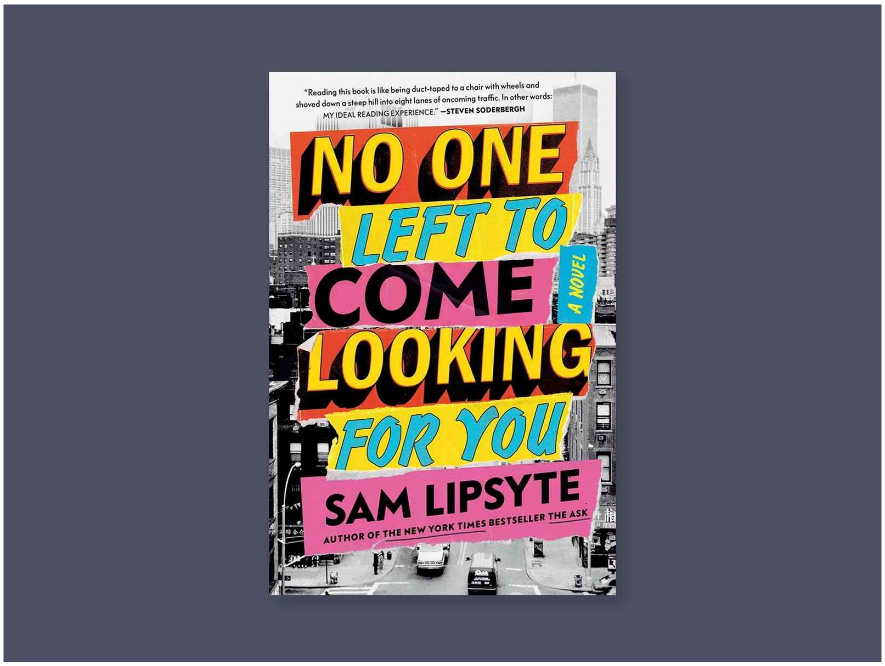


Read our reviews of the year's notable new fiction and nonfiction.



Dr. No, *by Percival Everett (Graywolf)*. Professor Wala Kitu (Tagalog and Swahili for "Nothing Nothing") is a specialist in nothing. At the outset of this waggish novel, he has been hired by a billionaire with the "idiotic" goal of becoming a Bond villain, who needs help breaking into Fort Knox—not

for the gold, but to steal an empty box. Everett's riffs on the maximalism of Ian Fleming's franchise include inexplicable location changes, double crosses—one courtesy of the priest from "The Exorcist"—a shark pool as a murder weapon, and the casual extermination of large civilian populations. Throughout, he mines the concept of nothing not just for comedy but also for the rich conundrums it presents in mathematics, physics, philosophy, and life.



[No One Left to Come Looking for You](), *by Sam Lipsyte (Simon & Schuster)*. In this novel, set in 1993, a bassist in his early twenties sporting the stage name Jack Shit investigates the disappearance of his drug-addled bandmate and his stolen Fender. As he pursues the mystery, Lipsyte takes the reader on a journey through the East Village at the height of the post-punk era, filled, in the bassist's words, with "all of us kids who moved to New York years too late." Though his cohort primarily frequents establishments in Alphabet City, they occasionally venture farther afield. "By the time you find what you've been seeking," Jack observes, "you're a different seeker."

By The New Yorker

By Inkoo Kang

By Richard Brody

By John Lahr

Comment

- **What Donald Trump's Trial Might Look Like**

What Donald Trump’s Trial Might Look Like

Presidents have been impeached, but none has ever been asked, after leaving office, to turn himself in for arraignment. The January 6th committee’s final actions could help change that.

By Amy Davidson Sorkin



On October 14th, the day after the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the U.S. Capitol voted to subpoena Donald Trump, he released a long letter of “anger, disappointment, and complaint.” The committee, he said, had “perpetuated a Show Trial the likes of which this Country has never seen before,” with “no Due Process, no Cross-Examination, no ‘real’ Republican members, and no legitimacy.” (And, he added, it got “very poor television ratings.”) The committee, of course, was not staging any sort of trial; it was conducting an inquiry into a series of events that culminated in Congress members fleeing a mob. But at its final public meeting, on December 19th, it voted to send criminal referrals to the Department of Justice regarding four felonies that Trump might have committed. If he wants a proper trial, the committee may have helped him get one.

One of the referrals is for violating a statute in the U.S. criminal code that deals with inciting, assisting, or giving aid or comfort to an insurrection. The others are for obstruction of an official proceeding (namely, the counting of electoral votes), conspiracy to defraud the United States, and conspiracy to make a false statement. Referrals like these do not oblige the D.O.J. to begin a prosecution, or to pursue the exact charges that they specify. Initially, those choices lie with Jack Smith, who, in November, was named special counsel for the department's investigation into January 6th, with a focus on Trump. (His remit also includes the question of whether Trump improperly kept classified documents at Mar-a-Lago.) If Smith recommends that Trump be charged, Attorney General Merrick Garland would have to sign off, and a grand jury would have to approve an indictment.

There is no exact model for what such a trial might look like. Presidents have been impeached, but none has ever been asked, after leaving office, to turn himself in for arraignment, with the prospect of arrest if he failed to comply. No judge has had to consider the question of cash bail for a billionaire who once lived in the White House, or asked the former head of state to turn over his passport. The voir dire of potential jurors would be an unprecedented spectacle; so would the mug shot.

Trump, however, would not be alone in facing trial as a result of January 6th. The D.O.J. has charged some nine hundred defendants, and has successfully prosecuted several members of the Oath Keepers on charges that match or parallel some of those in the committee's referral. Trump, unlike the Oath Keepers, did not enter the Capitol on January 6th. From the White House, though, to take one example from an executive summary of the committee's final report, he "repeatedly and unlawfully pressured" Vice-President Mike Pence to reject several states' electoral votes in favor of fraudulent ones. (John Eastman, the former law professor who helped Trump devise what became known as the "fake electors" scheme, was the subject of committee referrals, too.)

The committee's nine members—including the Republicans Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger—ran a tightly managed process. In televised hearings, they were able to play the snippets of videotaped testimony that they judged most effective. Prosecutors at trial, by contrast, have to deal with the live testimony of the witnesses before them. The rules of discovery mean that

Trump's lawyers would have access to full transcripts of depositions and to any exculpatory material the prosecutors possess. Evidentiary disputes, such as the one over whether Cassidy Hutchinson's testimony that a Secret Service agent told her about an altercation in a Presidential vehicle counted as inadmissible hearsay, would be addressed not by tweets but by litigation. Another point of contention would be whether Trump knew that he'd lost the election and was thus acting corruptly. Witnesses such as Bill Stepien, Trump's campaign manager, and Greg Jacob, Pence's counsel, could speak to that. But Trump could call witnesses, too—and prosecutors could cross-examine them. He would also get to decide whether to take the stand himself, a decision in which his vanity would surely be a factor.

Trump has made many frivolous claims of executive privilege, including one, involving a document request from the January 6th committee, that the Supreme Court rejected. A trial would no doubt bring new objections and appeals, some of which might be more substantive. All of this would take time, and the first Republican primaries for 2024 are fast approaching. An indictment and a trial would not legally bar Trump from running for President again. (Indeed, any attempt to block him from office if he's convicted would face what are almost certainly insurmountable constitutional challenges.) And whoever is sworn in as President in January, 2025, would have the option of pardoning Trump.

But a Presidential pardon would be limited to federal crimes. The first indictment of Trump related to January 6th may come at the state level, in Fulton County, Georgia, where District Attorney Fani Willis appears to be in the late stages of her own investigation. Willis has a repertoire of Georgia laws to draw on, including a statute on criminal solicitation of election fraud, which would seem to describe the phone call in which Trump demanded that Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger "find" him more than eleven thousand votes. A special grand jury has been sitting for months, and has heard testimony from a range of witnesses, including Governor Brian Kemp. Georgia would likely be the focus of any federal trial as well, because the Trump team's attempts to overturn the election there were especially blatant. In addition to the Raffensperger call, which was recorded, the effort to advance the fake-elector scheme in Georgia left a rich paper trail. Incidentally, Georgia trials, unlike federal ones, can be televised.

Trials inevitably have uncontrollable aspects, even when the defendants are more predictable than Trump. They are rightly harder and riskier for prosecutors than hearings are for members of Congress. What's at stake for Trump is his freedom, not just his television ratings: the charges that the January 6th committee referred carry sentences of up to twenty years in prison. But the adversarial nature of the process can be highly productive. The committee came up with a good deal of evidence; a trial is where it can be tested. ♦

By David Remnick

By Isaac Chotiner

By Margaret Talbot

By Jane Mayer

Crossword

- The Crossword: Thursday, December 22, 2022

By Caitlin Reid

Dept. of Song

- **Todd Rundgren, Renaissance Rocker**

Todd Rundgren, Renaissance Rocker

Besides “Hello It’s Me,” his C.V. includes playing in a Bowie tribute band, producing Meat Loaf as a Springsteen parody, and getting drunk with Mrs. Soupy Sales.

By Nick Paumgarten



Todd Rundgren, the record producer, sound engineer, songwriter, and recording artist, has had such a strange career in the music business that it somehow does not seem strange that, at seventy-four, he has been performing in a David Bowie tribute band. This on the heels of a few Beatles-tribute tours. A giant covering giants.

“I’ve already determined that I’m not doing any more Beatles,” he said the other day. “I’m Beatled out. At this point, I’m kind of tributed out.”

He was in a bar in Chelsea, on a day off from the Bowie tour (twelve gigs in thirteen nights), sipping what he called a Ukrainian Mule. Known in his youth as Runt, he’s sturdier now, with long two-tone hair and a vibe that manages to be both beatific and bearish. He arranges his own travel, to avoid the tour bus and the *COVID* risk. He doesn’t own a cell phone. “I actually

have my wife’s spare in case I need an Uber,” he said. They live on the island of Kauai; his wife owns a tiki bar.

The bar in Chelsea was on the ground floor of the building where, fifty years ago, he set up his first recording studio, Secret Sound, with Moogy Klingman. “He had the loft space and was living there,” Rundgren said. “And I had the wherewithal to equip it. By then, I was getting a budget to make my next record.” His previous album—the one with the hit “Hello It’s Me”—had done well, so he spent the budget on equipment instead of studio time. “I built the console. We wired it all up ourselves, did our own soldering.” Someone had given him a shoebox of peyote buttons. “I’d have one for breakfast, one for lunch, and one for dinner. I was high for a month.”

Rundgren, originally from the Philadelphia area, came to New York in late 1967 with his band, Nazz. “We were a dress-up band, a glam band,” he said. “I recall our excursions starting in Brooklyn, looking for an affordable place, and by the time we found something it was in Great Neck, on Long Island.” He left Nazz after a year and a half. “I was spending my days in the Village with clothing designers. There was a boutique down on Christopher Street called Stone the Crows. Crushed velvet was very popular. You would take velvet and ball it up, tie it up in twine, and boil it until it got permanently wrinkled.” He went on, “I was designing lights for a discothèque, doing anything I could to survive, because I didn’t know what I’m doing next. I knew I didn’t want to be in a band.”

With Nazz, he’d got some experience at the engineering console. Albert Grossman, manager of Dylan, hired Rundgren to make some of his old folk acts sound more modern. Grossman told Rundgren that he would make him the highest-paid producer in the world. This soon came to pass. Rundgren produced big albums for the Band, Grand Funk Railroad, Badfinger, Hall & Oates, and the New York Dolls, plus Meat Loaf’s “Bat Out of Hell,” which Rundgren treated as a spoof of Springsteen.

Meanwhile, at Secret Sound, and then in a home studio upstate (“New York to me is a monkey house”), Rundgren, eschewing earlier pop success, made experimental records of his own. “For most artists, it would always be in the back of their minds that if they didn’t sell records it would be the end of their career,” he said. “But I was producing records and making hundreds of

thousands of dollars at it, so it never crossed my mind when I was making my own records that I had to be economically successful at it, and that's what inspired me to get so crazy. I'm still making records now, and the people who were worried about the economics of it, well, they never found a day job."

There have been other income streams. "My most licensed song is 'Bang the Drum All Day,' and it used to be I could almost live off of it," he said. "It was in the trailer for 'Antz.' Just the trailer. Carnival Cruise Line was using it for all their ads, but they decided to change their image, and that's where that gravy train ended." He added, "I always wondered why the phone company never used 'Hello It's Me.' "

Rundgren, earlier in his career, was hard-core sober, a scolder of stoned collaborators. The first time he ever drank was in his early twenties, while he was staying in Soupy Sales's pool house, in Los Angeles. Sales's sons were helping Rundgren record his first album, and their mother decided to get him drunk. Later, a Philly friend, a med student, introduced him to marijuana. "It got me to step back and look at the process more," he said. "Suddenly, I could see that things weren't happening *to* me—they were happening *around* me."

Does he still smoke? He took out a vape pen and drew on it. "As a matter of fact, I have a vanity line of cannabis coming out. It's called Hello It's Weed." ♦

By Hannah Goldfield

By Adam Iscoe

By Molly Ringwald

By Bryan Washington

Fiction

- **“Notions of the Sacred”**

Notions of the Sacred

By [Ayşegül Savaş]



Audio: *Ayşegül Savaş reads.*

I once heard a woman say that immediately upon finding out, she'd felt the dawning of a strange inner power. It seemed as though she could undertake any task, could live through any hardship. This was a strength not of muscles, the woman said, but of light. In this new form of herself, she felt more alive than she ever had before.

She was recounting all this once it was already over, after she'd had an abortion, but her memory of that brief experience was still tinted by her encounter with what she now believed to be immortality.

The woman's story stayed with me, and I thought about her words when I myself found out, searching my body and mind for signs of my own power. I can't say that I felt it, not in the way that the woman had described, but I certainly sensed a shift, as if I'd entered a different dimension and would from then on inhabit two worlds at once: one steady and flat, and the other mysterious, with depths I could not yet fathom but knew were there.

Ayşegül Savaş on the mystery of pregnancy.

The day I confirmed the news, I had taken a test and gone for a checkup, too. A stroke of luck found me an obstetrician who was available to see me that same afternoon. She conducted a scan and told me that everything looked good. I left her office feeling elated. On a whim, I entered a shop and bought a felt hat, wide-rimmed and peacock green. It was impractical, more costume than accessory, but I wanted to mark the day somehow—my entry into the new dimension.

As I walked down the street wearing the hat, I saw people glancing at me, and I beamed at them full of my own mystery, like a benevolence. I thought of the face of the Virgin Mother in scenes of the Annunciation, and had a new understanding of her inward gaze, at once present and far away.

That evening, I attended the birthday party of a former colleague. He lived in a northern suburb with his wife and two children. I cycled to the party, as I did to most places. It was a pleasure to be testing my strength under these circumstances. I had no doubts about my decision, even if my situation—single, in a foreign country—might appear difficult from the outside. Perhaps, I considered, this was the power that the woman had been referring to—this certainty that I would manage.

There were many people I didn't know at the party. It seemed that my colleague and his wife had formed a large community, though they, too, were foreigners. I could identify the friends who constituted their family here: the ones who were affectionate with the children, those who were putting away dishes in the kitchen, the woman who brought out the cake, making a joke of my colleague's age before presenting it to him.

Usually at such events, I'd be filled with a desire to talk to everyone I found interesting and simultaneously overwhelmed by the effort it would require to do so. Whereas on this evening I felt at ease. I was involved in conversations but not overly invested. I kept remembering the faces of the Annunciation, their calm dreaminess.

On the table of drinks, I had found bottles of non-alcoholic beer. I would never have thought to offer such a thing at a party, though I gratefully took one when I arrived. On my second or third bottle, I was approached by a man I'd identified as belonging to the inner circle of friends. Earlier, I'd seen

him take my colleague's young son and swing him high up in the air, to the child's wild delight.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice
Listen to Ayşegül Savaş read "Notions of the Sacred."

Don't get him so worked up before bedtime, my colleague's wife had chided, though she also seemed amused.

After we introduced ourselves, the man asked me whether I belonged to the American or the Greek school. I told him I was neither Greek nor American.

That's not my question, he said. I wondered if you belonged to the American or Greek *school of thought*.

Pointing to my beer, he said that the American school believed, out of superstition, that keeping a pregnancy secret in the early stages would insure the well-being of the baby, whereas the Greek school favored telling as many people as possible, to call on the protection of the community.

I feigned shock at his question, though I was, for some reason, neither shocked nor offended. I accepted that the man was flirting with me, in some unusual manner. I felt the same benevolence I'd experienced in the afternoon, when I'd beamed at strangers in my green hat, and I didn't deny my condition.

It had never occurred to me, I said, that women kept the news a secret out of superstition. I'd always assumed it was an outcome of patriarchy: if anything went wrong, it would be considered the woman's fault. Besides, women needed time to negotiate with their workplaces, to secure their positions, because their employers generally treated their fertility as a liability.

I see, the man said. You're probably right. I realized he was surprised that I'd taken his comment seriously. He must simply have meant to tease me about my drink, not knowing he was onto something.

In any case, he continued, I would place you closer to the waters of the Aegean than to the lakes of Michigan.

And I think, he added, that this is a very fine position.

Once again, I didn't object to his words.

For the time being, I had no intention of informing the man I had slept with. It had been a brief affair, and I could readily imagine his distress at receiving the news. I didn't have the patience for it, nor was I interested in any sort of commitment he might halfheartedly propose. I wanted only to enjoy my new state. I walked to the park in the early mornings; I spent evenings reading in bed. I went out for lunches on the weekend, sitting on café patios, chewing my food slowly and deliberately. It was early spring and the trees were luminous with papery leaves. In the mirror, I saw myself as part of this resplendent moment, even though I felt very tired. Perhaps this was what the woman had meant about the power that came over her: this sense of fragile beauty, but beauty nonetheless.

Some months before this, I had become reacquainted with Zoe. She and I had been close friends at university and had lived together for several months after graduation—a time that we later mythologized into a golden era. It was true that back then I thought of many people as close friends, because our relationships had not yet been put to any test. And although it seemed that Zoe and I shared much more than our youthful enthusiasm, we had grown apart over the years. One of us had achieved early success and flaunted it carelessly; the other had made an unfair comment that travelled through the circles of our mutual acquaintances. There'd been no reckoning or drama, but we both knew that something had turned sour. Still, we kept in cordial touch. Neither of us wanted to sever our bond completely; we would certainly cross paths through work, and we could not afford to be hostile. We followed each other's life on social media, and it was always with curiosity that I came upon Zoe's news. In photographs, she looked confident and warm. I liked this person, and I found myself missing her, wishing for her to be in my life again.

Zoe had recently moved to a small town nearby with her husband and came frequently to the city. She was the one to send an e-mail, suggesting that we meet for coffee. The first few times we got together, we were both guarded. We spoke of our achievements with false modesty, complained more than was necessary about our careers. Then Zoe sent me a message announcing

that she was pregnant. Years ago, she'd undergone a serious surgery that put her fertility at risk. This had always been a sincere point of contact in our friendship—Zoe's worry that she would not be able to have children—and with the announcement of her news our past grievances seemed to vanish.

The next time Zoe came to the city, we finally reconstituted our old connection. Zoe was now in the fourth month of her pregnancy, expecting a girl. She would have told me weeks before, she said, but there was such a taboo about sharing the news early.

Which is just awful, she said, because it leaves women feeling totally alone.

I was glad for my friend and for our renewed closeness, which at last felt untainted.

So it was with Zoe that I first shared my news, excepting the man at the party. Perhaps I wanted to talk to a woman in a similar state, as if she could offer protection through her kindred position.

I wrote to Zoe asking whether her daughter would have any rules regarding cousins coming to sleep over.

What!! Zoe wrote back. What are you saying?!

Immediately, she called me and switched on her video.

We didn't have a habit of speaking on the phone, and the gesture touched me. We were both teary-eyed onscreen. I told her about the affair, and about my scan. I shared with her my feeling of belonging to two different dimensions.

Oh, my goodness, Zoe said. There is no better way to put it.

We complained about the unfairness of not being able to drink alcohol, not even a glass now and then, because we'd been warned that the risks of moderate consumption had not been properly studied. If men got pregnant, we said, the effect of every drop would have been documented. But complaining was also a way of expressing our contentment. It was, perhaps, a ritual of sorts, to ward off the evil eye.

I'm so glad you told me, Zoe said. I wish I'd shared with friends earlier. But I'm so glad we're in this together.

She kissed the tips of her fingers and blew on them. I blew kisses back.

In the coming days, we exchanged frequent messages. Zoe told me to honor the space I was in, to be gentle with myself and listen to my body, surprising me with her fluency in this type of language.

The next time she came to the city, our meeting was even more enthusiastic. We sat on a restaurant patio, both of us in long, sleeveless dresses.

You and I are so connected, Zoe said.

She was in her sixth month, and her hands moved often to her belly, pulling down the fabric of her dress, as if to assert her condition. We ordered grilled fish, and—as a joke or celebration—asked the waiter if the restaurant had non-alcoholic beers.

Over lunch, Zoe told me at greater length about how she had conceived, without any intervention, thanks to a careful diet and daily meditation, though she had been told by several experts that it would be difficult.

Your body knows how to heal itself, she said, and it hears your intentions.

As for me, I'd hardly given the matter any thought. It was an accident, even though it had recently begun to dawn on me that my time was running out. Still, I hadn't proposed anything to the men in my life, had not considered I.V.F. or freezing my eggs, even if I could have afforded to. I'd done nothing more than abandon myself to pleasure.

Which just goes to show you, Zoe said, that these doctors don't know anything about the miracle of our bodies.

I wasn't quite sure what she meant. After all, I'd never consulted doctors, though they would probably have told me what I already knew, that I was past the limits of youthful fertility. Still, I didn't object to what Zoe was saying. If anything, I encouraged the conversation: the wonder of our synchronicity, the way it had happened so naturally for us both. There was

the sense that we were special in our good health, in the blessing we had received. I didn't acknowledge our smugness then, or, if the thought occurred to me, I brushed it away.

I had now shared the news with a handful of people. These announcements felt like gifts I was offering, letting the recipients know that they had an important place in my life. And with each I felt a thickening around me, of joy, perhaps, or love.

My mother had already decided that she would stay with me for the first few months after the birth. On the phone, I recounted every new discomfort I felt, and my mother cooed and soothed me.

From time to time, I told her Zoe's news as well. What sort of birth she wanted, her plans for returning to work, the curious new ways of her body. I jokingly scolded my mother that no one had told me about all the bizarre things that happened in a pregnancy.

I never thought you had any interest, my mother said. If I'd known, I would've told you everything!

There was a fresh intimacy when we talked, as if we were quenching an old thirst. I knew that my mother worried about the man I'd slept with; she wanted me to talk to him before long, to ask how much he would like to be involved. But she didn't want to disturb our bond, or say anything that might upset me.

It was for this reason, I assumed, that she didn't question Zoe's return to my life, either. Years ago, when I was consumed by the waning of our friendship, I had turned to my mother to vent my frustration. I told her about the time Zoe had asked for my help in writing a proposal. I'd given her all my best ideas, I said bitterly, but once Zoe received the grant she never acknowledged my contribution. My mother had raged against Zoe, and told me that I should not trust her again. My mother generally thought of me as being naïve in friendships, giving more than I received. I needed her comfort. Otherwise, I might have told her that even the most seemingly one-sided friendships worked on reciprocity; if I offered more, I also received the satisfaction of my own kindness.

Zoe and I had both got generous commissions in the past weeks. Our old competition seemed truly irrelevant now. We discussed how bountiful this time of growth was. We'd made a routine of talking on the phone in the evenings while walking.

No wonder, Zoe said, that birth and creativity spring from the same chakra. The world was opening up to us, setting us on our paths.

I, too, had begun to talk like Zoe—about intentions and fate, the deep knowledge of nature and our bodies. I liked the underlying message within this way of speaking—that everything happened for a reason, that I was at the center of meaning with my unique wisdom.

During one of our evening conversations, we decided that I would visit Zoe and her husband in their town for a long weekend. I was in my third month by then, and already feeling less tired. My trip would coincide with a gathering Zoe was organizing. Not a baby shower, she emphasized, but a ceremony to celebrate life.

When it happened—when the bleeding started—I was at home. I called my mother as soon as I got in the taxi.

Oh, no, my mother said. Oh, no no no no no.

I had called her in part thinking that she might be able to stop it, absurdly remembering the theory of the Greek school. *Calling on the protection of the community*, the man had said, and I repeated his words over and over until the taxi pulled up at the hospital.

In the emergency room, I was asked to wait. One woman was brought in on a stretcher, escorted by two policemen. When she went to the toilet to provide her urine sample, one of the policemen went with her and the other guarded the main door. Another woman arrived with a gym bag. Soon a nurse came to her side and asked if she was ready.

All right, the woman said, smiling. Let's go.

I was trying to intuit whether I was still in the other dimension, but it was so hard to tell, to untangle one thing from the other.

The doctor was kind, and matter-of-fact. He said that he didn't have good news for me. He presented the options—medicine or surgical removal—adding that I could certainly wait several days before making a decision.

It's completely up to you, he said, as if he were doing me a great favor. Whatever you'd like.

I called my mother again on my way home. Night had fallen, and I'd decided to walk back, along an avenue with a thick tunnel of trees. I couldn't speak because of my sobbing, and my mother rushed to soothe me, pleading that it would be all right. Even then, I knew that she must be in greater pain than I was. And she was charged with the task of staying strong. Perhaps, I thought, this was the power of which the woman had spoken.

For the sake of my mother, I calmed myself. I repeated to her what the doctor had told me: that it had happened some weeks ago and there would have been no way of preventing it.

At home, I texted Zoe. I was hoping she would call me immediately, as she had the first time, because I wanted to cry without rein.

Oh, darling, Zoe wrote back. Oh, my sweetheart.

But she didn't call.

The next morning, I had a message that she was thinking of me, followed by a line of red, throbbing hearts.

For the rest of the week, I waited for it to begin. I'd been told at the hospital that it might take some time to start on its own, and that the safest course would be to end it as soon as possible. I was prescribed three different painkillers, each one stronger than the last, so that, should I decide to take the medicine, I would feel very little. The operation would also be pain-free. I would fall asleep and wake up and it would be gone. The thought disturbed me: it was a horror to not feel anything, to force my mind to adjust to the reality that my body hadn't yet accepted. I still felt nauseous; I couldn't stand the smell of perfume or alcohol; my abdomen was swollen. Phrases that Zoe might have used came to me as possible pieces of wisdom: that my

body would know what to do, that with acceptance would come relief. But I was no longer in the dimension, and these words did nothing to bring it back. Nor had I returned to the old one; I was now in a different place altogether, with its own misty depths.

During these days, I was told repeatedly that what had happened to me was very common. It was a shame, everyone said, that out of humiliation or superstition women did not talk about it more often. I was given statistics. Friends told me stories far more tragic than my own: women who'd experienced this farther along, lived through stillbirths, or the deaths of their young children. The stories didn't make me feel lucky, because they didn't mean that I had been spared. Rather, I felt that I had now entered the realm of misfortune, where tragedies suddenly became possibilities, rather than anecdotes about the lives of others.

I hadn't spoken to Zoe since she'd sent me the message of throbbing hearts, and I sensed that she was avoiding the corrupted atmosphere that surrounded me—that she feared it would be harmful for her to approach, to breathe in the fumes of my hazardous environment.

I kept remembering, then forgetting, that I should tell Zoe I would not be able to make it to her celebration that weekend, though I assumed that she would have figured this out already. I decided to go on a trip alone to the sea, and bought a train ticket for the next day, with only a hasty note to tell my boss that I would be away. I realized that I must be acting strangely, but I had no strength for explanations.

The contractions began as the train left the city—travelling past the suburbs, the factories, the empty industrial allotments—then subsided as we moved through fields and small towns erupting out of the cloth of hills. Some hours later they started again, washing over me with their own meaning so that I no longer had to think about my situation or try to make sense of it. I needed only to bear the pain. I knew that these were probably not contractions but cramps; I wasn't giving birth but disposing of life. And yet, in this dimension, they constituted their own sort of birth, a solemn ceremony.

By the morning, at the pension I had booked for the weekend, it was all over. The pain had pressed down on me in crashes of thunder, threatening to split

me apart. Then—swiftly, mercifully—it had departed.

I walked on the beach, windy that day and unpopulated. The great length of sand filled me with a determination to carry on. I walked for almost an hour, then sat on a smooth bed of rock. I thought how nice it would be to have lunch and a glass of wine when I returned to the pension. The dimension was withdrawing, collapsing in on itself, just like the shocking departure from my body some hours before. I could see myself back in the world, with its simple joys and routines.

At the pension I checked my phone. There was a call from my mother, and several messages from friends asking how I was doing. I responded to them one by one, describing the events of the morning and adding that I felt much better.

I'd inquired at the reception desk about lunch, and received an enthusiastic recommendation for a café. I would go there after a nap, the thought of which filled me with pleasure. I kicked off my shoes and got into bed. For some minutes I browsed on my phone—news sites and social media—feeling grateful that I could be interested in any of this, in the old, familiar flatness. I saw that Zoe had posted photographs from her ceremony. She was wearing the same long dress she'd worn to our lunch, and had a wreath of flowers in her hair. It was a perfect costume, communicating all the creativity and bounty that she and I used to talk about on our evening walks. Two women I didn't know stood on either side of her, with their hands on her belly.

I could see another reason for Zoe's silence, one that differed from my feeling that my misfortune repulsed her. It might simply have been awkward that what happened to me coincided with her celebration. She had decided that once she'd had a chance to honor her happiness, she would attend to me. She'd hold a space for both, she must have reasoned, the light and the dark.

It all seemed so ordinary—this bargaining with the universe.

I was sure I would receive a message from Zoe very soon, even that day, suggesting that we talk on the phone or meet up. *But only if you feel ready*,

Zoe would add. The murky days were over. She could now offer me condolence and wish me strength. ♦

By Cressida Leyshon

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

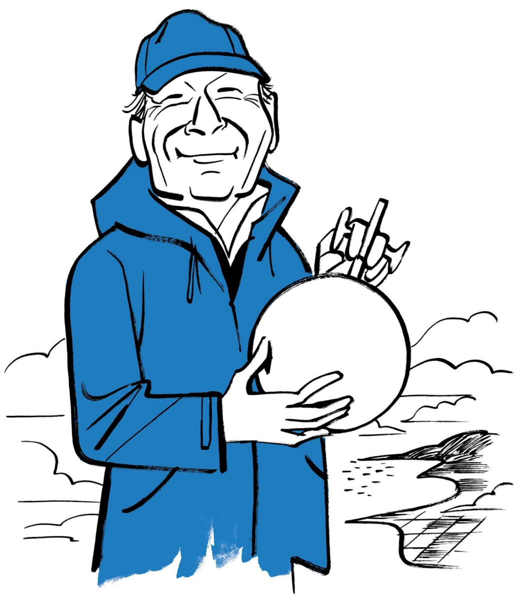
Hawaii Postcard

- [A Hawaiian Volcano vs. the Keeling Curve]

A Hawaiian Volcano vs. the Keeling Curve

When Mauna Loa erupted last month, the lava flow messed with some instruments that measure carbon dioxide, so a scientist tried Haleakalā, a volcano next door.

By Jack Truesdale



Mauna Loa, the world's biggest active volcano, on Hawaii's Big Island, erupted last month, after almost four quiet decades. As lava oozed down the mountainside, residents packed go bags and amateur volcanologists flew in. Some Hawaiians came to make offerings to the goddess Pele; the mayor warned spectators not to throw marshmallows. Amid the hoopla, the lava shut down some scientific instruments. "We didn't want to set a new record for the biggest hole in the curve," Tim Lueker, a scientist at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, said recently. He meant the Keeling Curve—an authoritative illustration that the planet is warming—which had been tracking carbon dioxide almost continuously from 1958, when Charles David Keeling created it, until November, when the lava took out power lines. It has not gone down since Mauna Loa last erupted, in 1984.

“The number of earthquakes went way up in September,” Lueker said, driving a rented Dodge Challenger up a two-mile-high volcano called Haleakalā, on Maui. “It seemed inevitable that sooner or later the volcano could erupt.” The mission: scout a backup carbon-tracking site at the summit, safe from mundane emissions (humans, cars) and future eruptions, to keep the graph going. “The Keeling Curve is going to be eligible for Medicare next March,” Lueker said. (He and the curve share a birthday.)

As he drove higher, houses became fewer and the temperature fell. “It could be an excellent comparison to what’s happening at Mauna Loa if we can get an instrument in here,” Lueker said, putting on a sweater four thousand feet above sea level. Clouds slid along a steep green hillside. “Whenever you start making—this is something Dave Keeling really showed the world—very precise measurements over time, you always learn things you didn’t know about.” He was alarmed to see a few cows. “Odd. We don’t want cows around our measurements.”

After watching Jacques Cousteau on TV as a kid in Michigan, Lueker studied chemical oceanography in college, hoping to fight marine pollution. “I wanted to go to work for the E.P.A.,” he said. Bad timing: Ronald Reagan had appointed someone named Anne Gorsuch Burford to run the agency. “They wanted to just get rid of all the regulations,” he said. “And her son is on the Supreme Court.” Lueker ultimately decided to take a job in Keeling’s lab.

As the air thinned, the terrain turned to black sand and sharp volcanic rock. Lueker parked at around ten thousand feet, put on a windbreaker, and ascended a hill. “We want to sample above those guys,” he said, waving at a billow of fog to the east. The sky in the southwest was clear, with thirty-knot winds. “This is the perfect place,” he said.

He unpacked a cardboard box: two glass vacuum globes the size of volleyballs, with protruding nozzles—“Keeling flasks.” (One such flask was just sent to the Smithsonian.) “You don’t want any CO_2 from humans getting in the flask, so you can’t breathe while you’re taking samples,” he said, hefting one of the contraptions. He inhaled deeply and marched into the wind, holding the flask aloft. He twisted a knob and the flask sighed loudly.

He closed the valve. “That was the air whistling into the vacuum,” he said, free to breathe again. He set the flask in the box and picked up the other.

Two women strolled into Lueker’s path, one holding a baby in a beanie, all three emitting carbon dioxide.



“Guess you’re right—I do internalize criticism.”
Cartoon by David Borchart

Share

Link copied

Shop

“We have to wait for the pedestrians,” Lueker said, standing aside.

“I’m sorry!” one of the women said.

“It’s O.K.!” Lueker said. “The wind’s going to blow it all away really fast.”

He held his breath, then repeated the operation with the second flask. “This is historic stuff,” he said, back in the car. He’d ship the flasks to California and analyze the concentration of CO_2 in them. “There could be a lot of really interesting information coming from this site, compared to Mauna Loa,” he said. (Lueker and Ralph Keeling, Dave’s son, recently started measuring carbon dioxide on Mauna Kea, next to Mauna Loa, but tour-bus exhaust has been spiking their readings.)

Lueker entered a nearby visitor center and introduced himself to a park ranger with a handlebar mustache. He said that he was looking for a building where his team could keep its instruments, and asked the ranger if there were any storage spaces in the park.

“That’s an upper-management question,” the ranger said.

Lueker got back in the car and headed down the mountain. “We’re going to need to fix this mess,” he said, looking out at the islands. “I’m hoping that the data we’re collecting will help the next generation of scientists figure out the things that need to happen next.” Getting greenhouse gases under control would be part of it, he said, and he knew that the Dodge wasn’t helping. “But we like our toys, we like to have fun,” he said. “The thing that really scares me is virtual reality.” ♦

By Bill McKibben

By Rachel Monroe

By Matthew Hutson

By Ben Crair

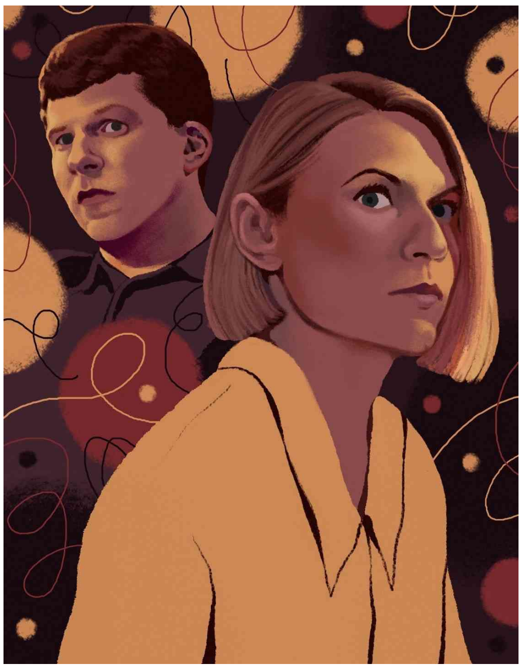
On Television

- **How “Fleishman Is in Trouble” Ditches the Clichés of the Female Midlife Crisis**

How "Fleishman Is in Trouble" Ditches the Clichés of the Female Midlife Crisis

The freshest observations—and emotional wallops—in the adaptation of Taffy Brodesser-Akner's novel center on the accrual of the sometimes uncategorizable breaches that women are expected to quietly endure.

By Inkoo Kang



The TV adaptation of the novel "Fleishman Is in Trouble" begins with the mildest and least interesting of the simultaneous midlife crises plaguing the show's three main characters. On a cloudless summer day in Manhattan, Toby Fleishman (Jesse Eisenberg), a recent divorcé, wakes up in his sparsely furnished apartment, alarmed that he is "suddenly, somehow, no longer living with Rachel," his wife of fifteen years. His angry confusion that Rachel (Claire Danes) has dropped off their preteen children at his place, in the middle of the night with little warning, briefly distracts him from his general dismay that his offspring have become products of the Upper East Side: his daughter (Meara Mahoney Gross) screeches that the clothes her mother packed for her are more suitable for the Hamptons than for camp,

and even his sweetly soft son (Maxim Swinton) asks for golf lessons. Toby is overwhelmed, but he is also a wealthy, trim doctor in his early forties. A nonentity to women during his youth, he is so consumed by the endless prospects on a dating app that it takes him several days to realize that Rachel has disappeared.

Toby's longtime friend Libby (Lizzy Caplan) is equally captivated by the possibilities that have opened up for him since his divorce. Her envy is a symptom of her more advanced malaise. A former men's-magazine writer and now a dissatisfied stay-at-home mom in New Jersey, Libby narrates "Fleishman" in a suffocatingly relentless and writerly voice-over. (The character bears a biographical resemblance to Taffy Brodesser-Akner, who once worked for *GQ* and has translated—or perhaps transliterated—her best-selling book for the screen.) As Libby claws for an escape from suburban predictability and, in the process, imperils her marriage to an agreeable enough lawyer (Josh Radnor), she begins to dread going home. Wandering the city after a platonic sleepover at Toby's, she says, "I always returned to the museum of my youth, trying to find the last place I'd seen myself."

Rachel, the least solipsistic of the trio, would say that she can't possibly squeeze another crisis into her schedule. As her ex-husband attempts to solve the mystery behind her vanishing, the show drops clues to its much larger reveal: that Toby has been an unreliable narrator of his marriage, and that, while his years with Rachel were disappointing, hers were harrowing. (Perhaps fittingly, the boyish Eisenberg and the balletic Danes never look quite right as a couple, even in their characters' meet-cute chapter.) Because Rachel is a hard-charging talent agent—an "ambition monster," as he calls her, with a blond bob so severe and exact it could've been cut by a scalpel—Toby is often blind to her vulnerabilities. When telling Libby and their mutual friend Seth (Adam Brody) about a time when Rachel was roofied at a work event, Toby maintains that "nothing had happened to her," explaining that she had been brought home by a colleague. It's not the last time he minimizes a humiliation or violation experienced by his wife. Over the years, as Toby persists in judging his partner, rather than trying to understand her, Rachel's behavior and motivations only grow more inscrutable. When we finally revisit the marriage's milestones from her point of view, contextualized in her needs and desires, they are devastating in their coherence.

Which Fleishman is in trouble? That we must first consider Toby's grievances is part of Brodesser-Akner's multipronged gender critique. The show is set in 2016, and the ubiquitous Hillary signs in the background allude to the leniency that society tends to grant men at the expense of women. It's a testament to how quickly social movements can crest that the criticism already feels slightly dated. The series misses the opportunity to interrogate where this "himpathy"—the reflexive sympathizing with men in heterosexual disputes—comes from, especially as it pertains to Libby, the character most outwardly suspicious of women. In the Internet parlance of the late Obama era, Libby was probably a "cool girl," a young female writer who aspired to make her mark primarily among men and whose literary hero was a celebrity journalist—played, in a casting coup, by Christian Slater—once acclaimed for his misogynistic divorce memoir. Until Libby opens her mind to Rachel's version of events, her only meaningful friendships are with men. But her seeming aversion to other women, and especially to other moms, goes noticeably unexplored in this series about the overlooked layers of female interiority.

And yet it's hard to deny how compassionately, even beautifully, Libby's and Rachel's midlife crises are rendered. Previously, television's foremost chronicler of women at a graying crossroads was arguably Joey Soloway, whose series "Transparent" and "I Love Dick" (the latter co-created by Sarah Gubbins) were distinctly horny; their characters embarked on ethically messy pursuits of sexual rediscovery, the intoxication of their libidinal potential matched by the destruction wrought on their families. But, despite all her clever reflections on online dating, Brodesser-Akner is less interested in the erotic. "Fleishman" is also contemporary enough to ditch the cinematic clichés of aging women: the fretting over fading desirability and the long frowns in the mirror at emerging wrinkles or drooping body parts (not that Caplan or Danes possesses either). Libby obsesses over her youth because that's when her days didn't feel so prewritten; in one of the most effective instances of her voice-over, she says, "I didn't realize the real power I had was that I had no obligations. . . . I can't believe how briefly I held it, and how quickly I gave it away." Her compulsive nostalgia leads to a housewifely haze, enabled by marijuana and monomania, that deprives her family of her mental presence, even when she's home.

The middle-aged body takes a bleaker form in Rachel's tale, where it becomes a site of accumulated trauma. The series' freshest observations—and emotional wallops—center on the accrual of the sometimes uncategorizable breaches that women are expected to quietly endure and the isolation that results when loved ones don't acknowledge their pain. An early red flag goes up when Toby turns Rachel's complaints about her chauvinistic boss into a rant about his emasculation by the same man. The medical invasion that Rachel later suffers by an imperious ob-gyn during her first childbirth is distressing in its believability, and becomes more tragic when Toby's misinterpretation of her helpless earliest hours as a mother chips away at their union for the next decade. Danes, a powerhouse crier since "My So-Called Life," wrenchingly conveys the gradual stripping of the self that Rachel undergoes when it becomes more convenient for the men in her life to treat her—an unhappy wife, an incensed patient, a wronged employee—less like a person than like a problem to be dealt with.

But it's a vexing slog until the season's turning point, and Toby's joylessness, Eisenberg's familiar punchability, and Brodesser-Akner's apparent distrust of the actors to do their jobs make for wearisome viewing. Only in the penultimate episode, when Rachel tells her side of the story, does the stock satire of tony private schools and ski-resort comparisons fully pay off—though I did relish a scene in which one of Toby's self-righteous lectures to his kids about privilege veers into a galaxy-brain harangue about why "sunsets are also problematic." There are other pleasures along the way. The visual template set by the directing team of Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, who helm several episodes, finds an appealing balance between urban romance and naturalistic warmth, and the composer Caroline Shaw's gorgeous, hopeful-melancholy score climbs and sighs with the action. But, as a critic, I'm reluctant to recommend a show that sticks you with fairly grating characters who spend their time arguing about, say, whether a physician's salary of three hundred thousand dollars is sufficient. The series teaches, in more ways than one, that impatience can also be a virtue. ♦

By Inkoo Kang

By Naomi Fry

By Ariel Levy

By The New Yorker

On and Off the Avenue

- **Hell on Two Wheels, Until the E-Bike’s Battery Runs Out**

Hell on Two Wheels, Until the E-Bike's Battery Runs Out

In 2020, Americans bought more than twice as many electric bikes as electric cars. I test-drove a fleet of them and lived to tell the tale—and make recommendations.

By [Patricia Marx]



You can learn a lot about what's trending by reading T-shirts. A few months ago, I saw someone on the subway whose chest announced, "My other car is an eBike." The tee was onto something: e-bikes are the top-selling electric vehicle in the United States. In 2020, Americans bought more than twice as many e-bikes as they did electric cars (score: an estimated 500,000 to 231,000). In China, e-bikes outnumber all cars, e- and not e-, Edward Benjamin, the chairman of the Light Electric Vehicle Association, told me over the phone from his house in Fort Myers, Florida. He went on, "Can Americans change from a four-wheel culture to a two-wheel culture in the next century? I say absolutely! There ain't enough roadway, there ain't enough materials to build cars, there ain't enough wealth to sustain the car culture."

As someone who is not an influencer but an influencee, I have had an urge lately to strap on a helmet, join the traffic, and e-go with the flow. "When the pandemic came, that pretty much ripped the cover off of the e-bike business," Shane Hall, a senior buyer for Bicycles NYC, told me one afternoon at the company's Upper East Side operation, which was crammed with bicycles and accessories. Several of the latter sounded vaguely pornographic, such as Muc-Off dry lube, Tannus Armour inserts, and a Mudguard Mounting Kit. "Our sales were huge, especially cargo bikes—gotta get the kids to school." (Many private schools remained open during lockdown.) "Suddenly, biking became utilitarian," Hall said. "Some of our e-bike customers had never even ridden a bike in New York before." Post-lockdown, the e-bike momentum has continued. What's bad for General Motors—rising fuel prices, concern for the environment, etc.—is good for e-bikes, sales of which rose two hundred and forty per cent between July, 2020, and July, 2021. K. C. Cohen, the owner of Joulvert E-Bikes SoHo, saw a similar surge in sales. "A lot of corporate types lost their jobs and started doing deliveries," he said. "They needed bikes and we were the first responders and allowed to stay open."

It was in the summer of 2020 that I joined Citi Bike, the bicycle-share program serving New York City and parts of New Jersey. In February, Citi Bike had rolled out only two hundred e-bikes. By the end of the year, Citi Bike had three thousand, and had logged six hundred thousand first-time riders. One humid day this past summer, when I was huffing up Murray Hill on my pedal bike, an old guy who, I flatter myself to think, looked as if he should be the tortoise to my hare whizzed by on a hey-look-at-me, red motorized bike. Cheater!, I thought, as if he were Lance Armstrong on extra steroids. Actually, studies have shown that riders using pedal-assists—a type of e-bike that amplifies your pedal power but does not take over entirely—get more exercise than those on regular bikes, because they cycle longer and more frequently.

E-bikers, even the ones who don't have "Life Is Better with an E Bike" mugs, are so ardent about their new transports that you'd think they'd given birth to them. Ozzie Vilela, a cherubic-looking sixty-year-old I met on Fifty-seventh Street and First Avenue, as we waited at a red light—he on a peacock-blue folding Fly Wing-2 ($850), I on my legs—told me that he'd had his bike for only three months but had already persuaded two friends to

buy one. “When I ride in the morning, there are lots of parents taking their kids to school,” he said. “I’m invisible to the parents, but I can see the kids’ eyes are big. They’re thinking, Hey, I want a toy like that!” Clarence Eckerson, a videographer who lives in Queens, borrowed his wife’s Tern HSD ($3,699) and promptly bought his own. He rides thirty or forty miles a week. Carol Sterling, an eighty-five-year-old puppeteer, who has had two knee replacements and a hip replacement, e-bikes in Central Park a few times a week. “As I got older, I realized I don’t have as much stamina,” she said. “And yet I love being outside, feeling the sun on my face.”

Motorized vehicles, including e-bikes, are not permitted in New York City parks, although plenty of pedal-assists clog the paths and the drives, which is technically a violation. Asked about how the city deals with scofflaws, Meghan Lalor, a Parks Department spokesperson, said, “When safely able to enforce, we do.” In Los Angeles, John Bailey Owen, a TV writer, bought his Cero One ($3,799) after he and his wife got rid of their second car. Now he considers errands “so, so fun,” he said in an e-mail, which closed, “My ebike is my favorite purchase of all time. I love it, dammit.”

I weighed the pros and cons and concluded, “What’s wrong with cheating?” That there never seemed to be any electric Citi Bikes available made me want one desperately. They are the four-leaf clovers of the fleet. Among the total bicycle stock of 26,450, they number 4,450 but account for more than forty-five per cent of the rides. The most sought-after pedal-assists are the spiffy models that were released by Citi Bike last May. They are palest gray, whereas the old ones were scuffed Citibank blue. (Spooky coincidence: the color is similar to that of ghost bikes, a term that refers to the bicycles, usually freshly painted throwaways, that mark the site where a cyclist was killed in a road accident.) The new bikes have a mightier motor, so they accelerate faster, and a heavier-duty battery that enables the bike to be ridden sixty miles—more than twice as far as the old ones—before needing a charge. (An e-bike battery charges the same way as a phone: plug the charger into an outlet, connect your battery to the charger, and wait three to five hours on average. Many e-bikes don’t require you to remove the battery in order to charge it, but maybe you have a no-wheels-inside rule.) The downside is that the husky newcomers weigh around eighty-four pounds, which is fifteen per cent heavier than the blue ones, and can be cumbersome

to maneuver when you're not going fast. You know how it feels when you drive a First World War battle tank? Like that.

By the time I managed to snag a new model, I wasn't so gung ho about getting on it. My trepidation was similar to how I feel about trying heroin: what if I like it? I begin pedalling. The motor kicks in. It's not a jerky or a sudden sensation; it's more like when I was five and learning to ride a bicycle, being helped along by a gentle push from behind by my father. On the other hand, the bike's poor suspension makes me empathize with tennis sneakers put in clothes dryers. I tackle a hill, forty degrees upward. Easy peasy. Obviously, I have superhero legs—and a budding Icarus complex. Coasting downhill in a bike lane, the motor leaves me alone, knowing when it is wanted and when it is not. How does it know? E.S.P.?

Here we must break for a lesson on how e-bikes work. Every e-bike has a battery and a motor, and, if you don't know that, may I recommend my class on the invention of the wheel? The motor delivers power to your crankset by one of two systems: the pedal-assist and the throttle control. (Crankset, *n*. 1. the metal arm and surrounding components that connect the pedal to the wheel 2. *informal*. your neighbors in 8-G.) The Citi Bike is a pedal-assist. It will help you, but only if you help yourself. Pedal daintily and the boost it supplies will be commensurately unenthusiastic; pedal with more vigor and it'll send in the Marines. Cheaper pedal-assists have a cadence sensor, which, unlike the torque sensor on a Citi Bike, is binary and, when activated, can feel like a passive-aggressive shove. The motor shuts off when your speed hits eighteen miles per hour, a limit agreed on by Lyft (the operator of Citi Bike) and the Department of Transportation. Most e-bikes cut off at around that speed, the exact m.p.h. determined by the relevant state or municipality. In New York City, the speed limit for pedal-assist-only bikes (Class 1) is twenty m.p.h., and the same goes for Class 2, a pedal-assist with a throttle. Class 3 bikes, which are also pedal-assist and throttle, can travel up to twenty-eight m.p.h., but New York City law requires the rider to wear a helmet. If you find this interesting, you should join the City Council's Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure while the rest of us talk about throttles.

Throttles provide power regardless of what the pedal is or isn't doing. They are to regular bikes what Roombas are to brooms (pedal-assists being

Dustbusters). A throttle control is functionally a gas pedal on your handlebars, operated either by twisting one of the grips or by pushing a thumb trigger. Now, if they just had air bags and a cup holder . . .

Time to scope out what's available in the marketplace. By this point, I'd ridden only Citi Bikes, and I was a fan: no parking or maintenance, and they afford the possibility of a one-way ride, in case, for instance, it starts raining or you break your leg. They seemed great, but, having never sampled anything else, what did I know? "With a Citi Bike, you get a functional experience of a bike," a Trek employee told me. "They are good at being not broken and moving people around. They are not as good at being bikes, so riding one will not give you the experience of a lighter, better-made, and more fun bike." How much better could better-made be? Almost a thousand dollars better (which is approximately the least amount of cash you'd have to lay out for a decent e-bike)?

One of the oldest purveyors of electric bicycles in the city is Propel, situated at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. This pedal-assist-only business was started by Chris Nolte, who returned from military duty in 2003, disabled with a back injury. Over Zoom, he said that he had built an e-bike in 2011, so that he could join friends on a bike trip. That year, he opened Propel. At the time, the legality of pedal-assists in New York was fuzzy, and he racked up a series of fines (to the tune of six thousand dollars). He took the case to court, hoping to codify a pro-pedal-assist law as a boon to the environment. He won.

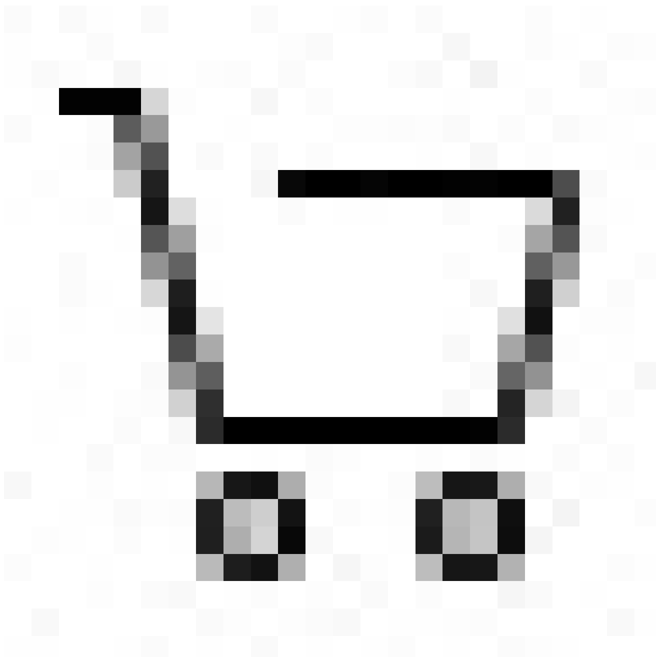


“You have the right to remain silent, but fair warning: I’m super uncomfortable with silence and will fill it with increasingly personal stories that I’ll regret sharing later.”
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

Share

Link copied

Shop



I visited Propel's Brooklyn showroom, which is open by appointment only, and was introduced to a few of the bikes on the floor by Roberto Jeanniton, who gestured to each with so much exuberance that his smartwatch kept reminding him to relax. Propel salespeople are called "matchmakers," because their mission is not to sell you a product but to introduce you to a vehicular partner that you will love. "When you ride an e-bike, the last thing you want to do is get off," Jeanniton said, touting the Tern cargo bikes, which allow you to tote a kid, an adult, and sometimes one of each, plus a bag or two of groceries from the Park Slope Food Co-op. O.K., but where in your New York apartment do you store this bulkitude? Most Terns can be stored vertically, and one model, the Vektron, folds into an origami-like configuration that can be rolled along like luggage, the handlebar becoming the handle. Terns range in price from $3,000 to $5,500, depending on add-ons, and many of the other brands are costlier still. The Benno eJoy ($3,799 and up), featuring wide tires and a comfortably ample seat, was inspired by the design of vintage Italian scooters. Jeanniton called it "a great date bike" and "great for an older crowd." Another Benno model—the RemiDemi—has a cargo attachment that can "carry a surfboard."

Jeanniton doesn't have the space for an e-bike at home, and commutes via Citi Bike, but I asked which model he would get if he could. The Riese & Müller Homage, he said. "It is the most comfortable bike I've had the

pleasure to ride," he said. Ramon Hernandez, who had just finished adjusting a Tern GSD, also loves the brand. Because the bikes' carbon belts don't require constant degunking and lubricating, like traditional chains? Because their dual batteries let you go twice as far? No. It's their panache. "If I'm sitting on a bike, I want to look a certain way," he said of these small-wheeled vehicles, so Quakerishly unadorned that they look like a picture of a two-wheeler drawn by a child. But, Jeanniton said, they cost "rich-uncle money"—$5,779 to $11,549.

Pricier bikes, forged from high strength-to-weight materials like carbon fibre and aerospace aluminum, tend to be lighter and faster. They are loaded with deluxe features, such as heart-rate connectivity, sensors that measure barometric pressure and air quality, and, on one bike (the Greyp G6; $6,799-$13,999), a button that saves the last thirty seconds of video taken by front and rear wide-angle HD cameras on the handlebars and uploads the footage to the rider's social-media feeds.

How much money is too much? "I don't think anyone *needs* to spend thirty thousand dollars on an e-bike," Christian Guaman, at the Specialized bike store in Long Island City, said. "It's a want." If what you want is to move around town encapsulated in a swish Kevlar-insulated cabin whose extras include stereo and temperature controls, then the Peraves MonoTracer MTE-150 is a must. Bonus: what look like training wheels pop out so you don't have to put your feet on the ground when you stop. Price tag: $85,000, which is so much cheaper than a jet pack ($350,000-$450,000).

You want cheap? Let's drop by Rollgood, in midtown. Crammed with bikes, scooters, and paraphernalia, this narrow storefront serves mostly delivery workers. Explaining that I was a journalist writing about e-bikes, I asked José, an older man, if I could take a floor model for a spin. "You buy one?" he asked, and said, "This is the one you should buy." He pointed to a black bike that looked as if it'd been around the block—a BEK24 ($425), with a fifteen-mile range and a fifteen-m.p.h. capacity. "What if I buy one and don't like it?" I asked, to which he replied, "You have fifteen or twenty minutes to bring it back and we'll refund your money." I eyed a sign on the counter:

NO REFUND
NO RETURN
NO EXCHANGE
NO STORE CREDIT

I moved on. What about a bargain online? “If you see an e-bike for a few hundred dollars on the Internet, it’s a piece of shit and will last a month, at most,” K. C. Cohen, at Joulvert, said. Or worse. If the bike’s lithium-ion batteries are defective (inexpensive ones are often not U.L. certified), they could explode and catch fire. (U.L. = Underwriters Laboratories, a century-old safety organization that tests and evaluates products, typically industrial equipment and home appliances.) NPR recently reported that an e-bike or e-scooter battery catches fire in New York City about four times a week. By mid-November, there’d been a hundred and ninety-one lithium-ion fires in 2022, almost double the figure in 2021. The increase mirrors a rise in the number of battery-powered devices used to deliver takeout food.

In early November, there was a fire in a Midtown East high-rise ignited by an e-bike battery in an apartment whose occupants fire marshals suspect were operating an illicit e-bike repair business. But most e-bike fires occur in lower-income areas. When the New York City Housing Authority proposed banning e-bikes in public housing, the plan was nixed, after workers’-rights activists protested that it would mainly affect poor and immigrant populations who rely on e-bikes for their livelihood. Before you curse delivery workers and the “Out of my way, I’m coming through, maybe even the wrong way!” attitude displayed by a handful of them, remember that the delivery apps punish the delivery guys who don’t arrive at their destinations lickety-split.

Another reason to buy from a reputable brick-and-mortar shop (like Propel, Bicycles NYC, Trek, Joulvert, Hilltop) is that if anything breaks—and it will—good luck getting it repaired at, say, Mike’s Fly-by-Night Bikes. Local shops take care of their customers as if they were family, putting them in “the fast lane,” as Cohen said. But some of these, such as Trek, Specialized, and Propel, tend not to work on bikes that aren’t theirs, because they don’t have the parts. Stay away from big-box stores, too; *Consumer Reports* warns that their service and support are poor.

New York is dense with bike shops, but, for those of you who live in the hinterlands, don’t despair. According to Shane Hall (of second-paragraph fame), some excellent brands are available online, among them Rad Power (the largest e-bike retailer in the U.S.), Aventon, Magnum, and Gocycle. I spoke to a real-estate developer named Ryan Johnson, who is building the first community designed to be car-free. (It is called Culdesac Tempe, near Phoenix, Arizona; rentals come with a thousand dollars’ worth of “mobility benefits” each year.) Johnson has been dubbed the Jay Leno of e-bikes, because he owns more than seventy specimens. He treats his collection as a “library,” loaning the devices to people who often end up buying one of their own. (Try borrowing Leno’s McLaren F1.)

Did Johnson have any tips for a novice? “Just buy one,” he said. “People are almost always happy with what they have. And e-bikes are the gateway drugs to more e-bikes.” The only e-bikes he’d stay away from are the ones sold on Amazon. Among those he especially recommends, the cheapest is the Lectric XP Lite ($799). He also likes the Dutch VanMoofs, citing the S3 and X3, and their anti-theft features, which include automatic rider recognition and a lock on the wheel that opens with your phone or by entering a code on the handlebars. If your VanMoof ($2,548) is stolen, there are onboard alarms and smart location tracking, and you can buy insurance ($348 for three years) that guarantees you a replacement if the company’s Bike Hunters can’t find it.

On second thought, if you live in the hinterlands, move. Unless, that is, assembling small vehicles in your garage is your passion. Yes, a few brands come ready-to-ride, but most want you to at least screw this thingy into that other doohickey with a type of wrench you’ve never heard of. The clincher, though, in buying an e-bike is a test drive—the quickest way to know if motorized micro-mobility is for you. Any establishment that doesn’t allow you this small indulgence is an establishment you might not want to patronize. Call ahead to arrange for a road test and bring a credit card and a driver’s license (hey, isn’t the point not to drive?). In many cases, you may be accompanied on your excursion by a shop employee. According to K. C. Cohen, there have been cases of fake customers who use fake credit cards and then ride a sample bike off into the sunset, one way.

Long Island City is a glorious place for a joyride. Once an industrial zone primarily populated by storage units, it now has three bike shops (the No. 1 sign of gentrification), while retaining plenty of space for freewheeling. The newest shop, and the only one with a café, and a banner that reads “Pedal the Planet Forward” (No. 2 sign), is Specialized, an expansive two-level store that carries its eponymous brand exclusively. Christian Guaman e-ushered me around Hunters Point South Park along a lovely bike path hugging the river. I rode a Turbo Como SL ($3,250-$4,250), capable of achieving a speed of twenty-eight m.p.h., but it didn’t have to try that hard with me. Never mind that the company’s e-bike slogan is “It’s You, Only Faster”; it turns out that I’m more scaredy cat than cheetah. While Guaman and I tool along the waterfront, the wind blowing so hard I feel like Miss Gulch cycling through the tornado, let’s talk taxonomy.

There are several ways to categorize e-bikes, and I’m not counting the one most meaningful to me, which is by color. Technically speaking, it matters whether the motor is a hub-drive or a mid-drive. A hub-drive motor, commonly found in cheaper bikes, lives in either the front or the back wheel, propelling the bike by pushing it; a mid-drive perches above the pedal and the surrounding chain kit and caboodle, where it amplifies your pedal exertion, energizing a more nuanced assist that reacts to gear shifts. Most e-bike outfits, however, organize their stock according to intended use. To make things confusing, the nomenclature varies from company to company. At Propel, the inventory is divided into Comfort and Cruising, Commuters, Kids and Cargo, and Adventure. Specialized uses the terms Road, Mountain, Commuter, Cruiser, and Cargo. Within each category are more categories. Among Specialized’s mountain bikes, you can select Cross Country, Trail, Downhill, and Dirt Jump. At Trek, there are Road Bikes and Hybrids, and also Mountain Bikes. If you intend to have adventurous fun on your commute in a mountainous city while carrying cargo, I guess any of the bikes would work.

Mid-excursion, Guaman and I trade bikes. When I tell him that his Vado SL 5.0 ($4,500) feels feistier than the Como, he explains that the Como may seem sluggish because it was designed to reproduce the vibe of a beach cruiser or a Citi Bike. At least, that’s what I think he said; a gust blew that page of notes out of my hand. We walk our bikes on the sidewalk the last half block back to Specialized, an exercise that introduced me to a nifty

feature of many higher-end e-bikes—the Walk Mode—without which dragging an electric bike can be a drag. (The average mid-drive model weighs between forty and seventy pounds.) This mode, sometimes called the assist function, provides oomph without your having to touch the pedals, even on stairs. Although I appreciated the help, the bike's brain was programmed to thrust my Vado SL 5.0 at two to four miles per hour. The thing felt overly pushy, as if I were trying to rein in a rambunctious Rottweiler on his leash.

At Bicycles NYC, Shane Hall selected a Gocycle G4i for me, because it's easy to ride ($6,000). "It automatically shifts gears for you. You don't have to know anything," he said, judging me correctly. The Gocycle's wheels are small, which makes them look farther apart than usual and makes the length of the seat tube (it connects the bottom of the bike's seat to the pedals) seem longer than it is; the bike's profile reminds me of a clown shoe. The shop's top-selling collapsible brand, the bikes are engineered to be folded up in less than twenty seconds, which makes me wonder if there are more bike-folding contests than I thought. Hall adjusted a Gocycle to my height (when you sit on a bike, only your tippy toes should touch the ground) and off I went. While trying to navigate around construction and traffic and dogs, I mentally wrote the second paragraph of my obituary, the one that contains the cause of death. I'd have risked riding in the bus lane, but then I'd have to rewrite my obit. I decided to illegally scoot down the sidewalk, figuring that I'd rather endure the wrath of pedestrians than that of drivers. "Asshole!" a guy yelled right away. "Yes," I muttered, "but not for the reason you think."

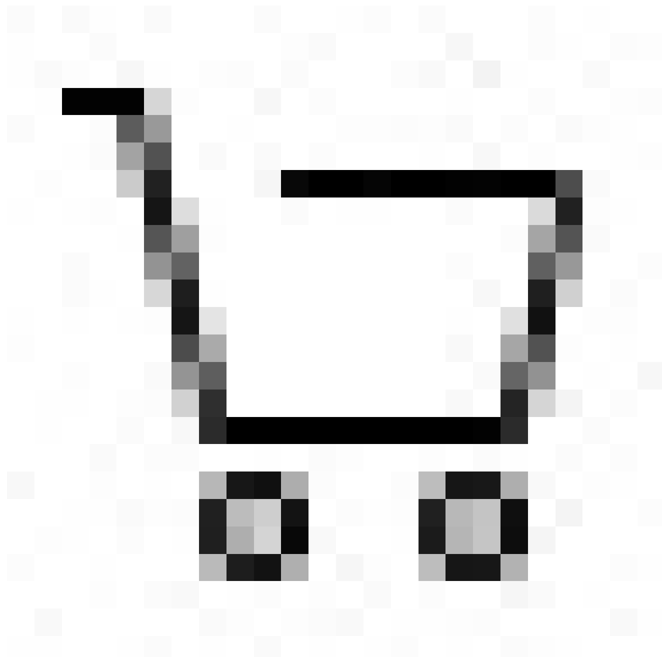


“Oh, no! We’ve pivoted too much!”
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

Share

Link copied

Shop



Maybe word got out about me, because, when I tootled around the Upper East Side on my Trek FX+ 2 loaner, the streets were deserted. The FX+ 2 ($2,500) is a hybrid, meaning it’s good to go on the road and off-road (leaving out what? oceans?). It has a rear-wheel hub, which makes it lighter (forty pounds) and supposedly less balanced than a mid-drive, but it seemed as stable as any seat on two wheels could be. Maybe it’s the FX+ 2, or being king of the road, or maybe I’m finally getting the hang of these newfangled gizmos, but I felt so confident that I sped up and sailed through a yellow light.

Correction: not newfangled. In 1881, in Paris, Gustave Trouvé fastened a lead-acid battery and a motor to a British tricycle, *et voilà*, he puttered his contraption along the Rue de Valois. Fourteen years later, on the last day of 1895, Ogden Bolton, Jr., received United States patent No. 552,271 for a battery-powered electric bicycle with a “6-pole brush-and-commutator direct current (DC) hub motor mounted in the rear wheel.”

Doesn’t “throttle-propelled” sound scary? As if you and your e-bike would be shot into space? Nevertheless, I gave it a go. The most chic examples I tried were at Joulvert, which also sells scooters. (Scooters are essentially skateboards with handles and motors but no seats, so let’s leave them out of this.) Cohen opened Joulvert in 2016, about fifteen years after he emigrated

from Israel. “It was the first serious e-bike shop in the city,” he told me over beverages at 19 Cleveland, a Mediterranean café he owns near Joulvert. At the time, e-bikes were not technically legal in New York, but, he said, “the law was inconsistently enforced.” Cohen started dabbling in the business in Israel in 2004, having enlisted his father to install cheap Chinese motors on standard bicycles. The business took off; he sold his share to his brother in 2012.

Cohen went to Burning Man for the next few years, each time bringing more e-bikes, which he distributed with the instruction “Go demolish them.” He explained, “I wanted a report on everything that could go wrong, so I could fix it.” The main problem was dust, so Cohen created a silicon-sealed electric system that was waterproof and dustproof. In the years since, his Burning Man clients have included Puff Daddy, Gerard Butler, and Paris Hilton. The bikes survived Burning Man, and their reputation was made.

Among the throttle models on display, I picked the Orbiter T1 ($3,000), because it did not look as if it belonged in “The Terminator.” To engage the accelerator, you push down on a spring-loaded thumb throttle on the right grip. Trying to summon the courage to press the throttle, I pedalled along the empty sidewalk of Broome Street. I turned onto Elizabeth Street, where there were some people on the sidewalk whom I preferred not to mow down. I switched to the street. Trembling, I pressed the throttle. Whoa! There was no jerk when the motor kicked in, as there can be with a pedal-assist. The throttle allows a more gradual acceleration than a pedal-assist does. It’s also useful in starting from a standstill on an upslope. By the time I reached the end of the block, I was ready to join the Hells Angels.

Let’s say you’d like an e-bike but don’t want to spend the money, or you already own a bike. One option is to buy an electric-bike conversion kit—essentially, a motor, a battery, and electric controls that you add to your analog bike. Most of these kits require you to swap out one of the wheels, a process that, according to instructions I’ve read, resembles performing a head transplant with a screwdriver.

If you think that sounds like a fun D.I.Y. challenge, I hate you. Luckily, there’s an alternative to this alternative. It is CLIP, an upgrade that you clamp onto one wheel of your bike which instantly electrifies it ($549). It’s

bigger than a barrette but not as big as a breadbox, and as easy to use as both. No tools are required. If, later, you're not in an e-bike mood, it takes a second to remove. This matte-white device weighs a little less than a cat (eight pounds) and looks like a sleek version of the boot that traffic cops stick on the wheel of your car if you've forgotten to pay your parking tickets. It contains a battery and a four-hundred-and-fifty-watt motor, and its two arms hug either side of the front wheel. A bike with CLIP installed can be ridden for fifteen to eighteen miles (or about forty-five minutes) on a single charge and travels up to fifteen miles per hour. CLIP can be preordered for shipping this spring, the initial run of a thousand having sold out.

I tried a prototype at the CLIP headquarters, in the Brooklyn Navy Yard's New Lab building. Dating from 1902, the building was the machine shop for every significant ship launched during both World Wars. Now it is home to more than two hundred startups. At the ferry dock, I was greeted by Somnath Ray, CLIP's C.E.O. and founder, a boyishly charming Indian architect whose résumé includes creating electric rickshaws, unfortunately at a time when the world wasn't ready for them. Ray chaperoned me to the CLIP offices, on the second floor, passing one groovy venture after another. He explained that CLIP works via "friction drive": "Think of it as a smaller gear driving a bigger wheel. CLIP is the smaller wheel and can deliver just the right amount of torque to the wheel."

Because it was a weekend and the Yard was empty, I was able to take a test ride back and forth along the concrete floor in a corridor downstairs. I pedalled, felt a nudge, then pressed a red button on the handlebar and got a burst of juice. Whee!

Chances are that New York won't be building a roof over the city, flattening its hills, and paving its streets with smooth poured concrete for my pleasure, at least not during the Adams administration. Short of that, what can be done to make life more bikeable in this city built by the car-loving Robert Moses under the guiding principle that "cities are created by and for traffic"? Other cities, particularly in Europe, have found ways of tackling the matter. Paris has committed to banning most cars from its city center by 2024. Utrecht has a three-story bike parking garage (the world's largest) that can hold more than twelve thousand five hundred bikes. (The Netherlands has the highest

number of bicycles per capita: twenty-three million for a little under eighteen million people.) Copenhagen synchronizes its traffic lights in favor of cyclists. It is a city in Norway, though—Trondheim—that has pioneered the invention most likely to be found in a children's book. On a dreadfully steep slope, the Trondheimers constructed the Trampe CycloCable, the world's first uphill moving sidewalk for cyclists. This cyclist-helper is four hundred and twenty-six feet long and not much wider than your foot, travels at three to four miles per hour, and is operated by an underground motorized cable. To use: While sitting on your bicycle, keep your left foot on the pedal, and place your right foot on the metal platform attached to the conveyor belt. Sit/stand tight and you will be raised to the summit. And it's free!

In that spirit of innovation, I solicited pie-in-the-sky ideas about how to make the city more hospitable to cyclists. Most suggestions involved bike paths: roomier, safer, and more of them. Joulvert's K. C. Cohen wants to make sliding doors on taxis mandatory, outlawing doors that open outward and garrote unsuspecting cyclists. Randy Cohen, an avid biker, who might switch to electric when his body parts are too old to continue pedalling, would like to see the elimination of free on-street parking, or, as he puts it, "the squandering of scarce public space to store private property." CLIP's Somnath Ray recommended that e-bikes have a tattletale button so that riders can report infrastructure problems and enforcement issues. Please, someone, get to work on realizing the dream of Roberto Jeanniton, from Propel: "I'd build bike lanes above the streets, like in 'Blade Runner,' or the High Line." Nobody mentioned offering money to people who cycle to work, but European countries have devised tax-incentive and purchase-premium programs. France, for instance, will give up to four thousand dollars to anyone replacing a car with an e-bike; Belgium will pay you twenty-five cents per mile if you bike to work.

Winter was approaching, and I don't like being outside when the temperature dips below eighty-three, but I was determined to find out what it was like to have access to an e-bike whenever I wanted. Zoomo is a worldwide business that rents e-bikes by the week or the month, servicing them and offering insurance ($49/week; $199/month). Most of the users are delivery people, for whom paying the Citi Bike surcharge on e-bikes for the long hours they work is prohibitive. I rode a Zoomo bike home, five blocks away. Designed in-house but made in Taiwan, the bike (there are two

models) is a workhorse, meant to be comfortable and reliable for long stretches of time. I can confidently report that my two-minute ride was very pleasant. The rest of the week? Turns out I don’t go anywhere. After a week, I returned the bike—another lovely jaunt—and resumed my daily twenty-minute routine on a pre-Peloton stationary bicycle. Why can’t someone electrify that thing? ♦

By Jill Lepore

By Ian Parker

By Ted Geltner

By Adam Entous

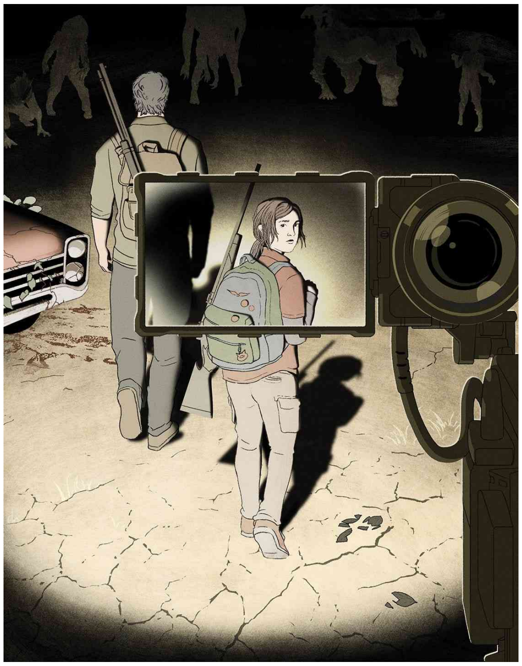
Onward and Upward with the Arts

- Can a Video Game Be Prestige TV?

Can a Video Game Be Prestige TV?

For decades, games' stories have been lost in translation. With "The Last of Us," Neil Druckmann and Craig Mazin are charting a different path.

By Alex Barasch



When the British actor Bob Hoskins agreed to star in "Super Mario Bros.," he had little sense of what he was getting into. The year was 1992, and, although the title on which the film was based had sold tens of millions of copies, a feature-length live-action adaptation of a video game had never been attempted. The movie's eventual tagline, "This ain't no game," reflected a self-conscious distance from its source material: a convoluted parallel-universe plot recast the heroes as Italian American handymen from Brooklyn and the princess they set out to save as an N.Y.U. archeology student. Hoskins himself hadn't even heard of the Nintendo franchise—but when his kids learned that he would be playing Mario they excitedly showed him the game. "This is you!" one said, gesturing to a pixelated mustachioed plumber. "I saw this thing jumping up and down," Hoskins later recalled, in doubtful tones. "I thought, I used to play King Lear."

The film marked the first major stab at a puzzle that Hollywood has been trying to solve ever since. The intent had been to produce a zany, subversive

comedy in the “Ghostbusters” mold; the outcome was a box-office bomb that Hoskins has called “the worst thing I ever did” and “a fucking nightmare.” Whereas “Super Mario Bros.” bore little resemblance to its namesake, subsequent video-game adaptations veered to the opposite extreme, prioritizing faithfulness without regard for what might be lost in translation from one medium to another. For three decades, the genre has been plagued by ill-defined characters, contrived in-jokes, and nonsensical lore dumps—and, with few exceptions, the impulse to cater to diehard fans at the expense of new viewers has alienated both. Nevertheless, studios and streamers, desperate for younger audiences and enticed by the promise of multibillion-dollar I.P., have forged ahead: Netflix alone has announced more than a dozen video-game adaptations. This past February, the turgid “Halo” was renewed by Paramount+ before the first season had even aired. In mid-December, Amazon ordered a show derived from the God of War franchise. Next year, Universal will take another run at a Mario movie, with Chris Pratt in the lead. And HBO has reportedly spent upward of a hundred million dollars on its best hope of breaking the curse: a series, premièring in January, based on a game called The Last of Us.

A Sony PlayStation title released in 2013, The Last of Us follows a man charged with shepherding a teen-age girl across a pandemic-ravaged America, where infected individuals are reduced to mindless assailants. What might have been a rote zombie story is instead a character study that includes Phoebe Waller-Bridge among its admirers. By the time Neil Druckmann, the game’s creator, walked into HBO’s offices, in 2020, he understood the risk he was taking. An Israeli immigrant with a trim, athletic build and salt-and-pepper hair, he’d learned English, in part, from the games he’d played throughout his childhood, and he approached different mediums as an ambassador for his own. A truly great adaptation, he told me, could “enlighten this whole other audience that cares about storytelling and hasn’t realized there’s amazing storytelling happening in games.”

But his evangelism had nearly gone awry. In 2014, a film version of The Last of Us was optioned by Screen Gems, a Sony subsidiary that he described, diplomatically, as geared toward making “a particular kind of movie.” Screen Gems is best known for another video-game adaptation, the commercially successful but critically reviled “Resident Evil” franchise; the most indelible image from the first installment is that of Milla Jovovich, clad

in a red dress and knee-high boots, sailing through the air to kick an undead dog in the face. Druckmann respected Sam Raimi, who had been hired to direct "The Last of Us," but he mistrusted the executives involved, who constantly asked for things to be bigger and "sexier." His aesthetic touchstone was "No Country for Old Men"; they wanted "World War Z." He also began to fear that fifteen hours of gameplay couldn't be condensed into a two-hour feature.

After years in development hell, Screen Gems relinquished the rights. Druckmann soon found himself clashing with Carter Swan, the executive in charge of I.P. expansion at PlayStation, who was intent on finding a creative partner to entice him. When Druckmann admitted that a film adaptation seemed wrongheaded, Swan informed him that the screenwriter Craig Mazin had said the same thing. "Wait," Druckmann said. "The 'Chernobyl' guy? Why can't I meet with *him*?"

A wrenching account of the 1986 nuclear disaster and its aftermath, "Chernobyl," which aired on HBO in 2019, was a drama built like a thriller, praised for its contemporary resonance and complex characters. Crucially, it also managed to impart grim visuals—skin sloughing off an irradiated worker; the suicide of a disgraced physicist—with emotional weight. Mazin's show earned nineteen Emmy nominations and won ten, including Outstanding Limited Series. Following this triumph, Casey Bloys, the head of HBO, had encouraged him to "write what makes you levitate." Mazin had been enamored of The Last of Us since its release—so much so that he'd already tried to reach Druckmann. ("I blew him off," Druckmann admitted to me, sheepishly. "I didn't know who he was.") The men finally met, and spent hours geeking out over each other's work—then concluded that, although The Last of Us would never succeed as a movie, it *could* be ported to television. Afterward, Mazin sent Bloys a note: "I am currently levitating."

Druckmann and Mazin went from mutual fanboys to collaborators. At a recent lunch, Mazin, who is bald, bearded, and naturally exuberant, drew out the more introverted Druckmann as they discussed the challenges of their project. When Druckmann expressed confidence that the show "will be the best, most authentic game adaptation," Mazin said, "That's not the highest bar in the world." He went on, "I cheated—I just took the one with the best

story. Like, I love Assassin's Creed. But when they announced that they were gonna make it as a movie I was, like, I don't know how! Because the joy of it is the gameplay. The *story* is impenetrable." The Assassin's Creed franchise boasted sophisticated stealth mechanics—a style of play focussed on avoiding detection by enemies—and lush historical settings; the 2016 film compelled Jeremy Irons to utter such lines as "She has traced the protectors of the Apple." Mazin added, "I still am struggling to understand how Abstergo and the Animus and the Isu—I mean, the Isu alone . . ."

"I don't even know what you're talking about, and I've played *so* many Assassin's Creed games," Druckmann said. He, too, was conscious of the genre's abysmal track record; so far, he said, only "kids' movies," such as the 2019 film "Detective Pikachu," had actually worked. Later, he ventured his own theory about failed adaptations: "The other thing that people get wrong is that they think people want to see the gameplay onscreen." Countless films have fallen into the trap; the most notorious is "Doom," a 2005 treatment of the pioneering first-person shooter. The movie, starring Dwayne Johnson and Karl Urban, featured an extended sequence that took weeks to shoot, relying on a combination of Steadicam and C.G.I. to re-create the perspective that had made the game famous. For five minutes, the action unfolded through the protagonist's eyes, with only his hands and his weapon visible at the bottom of the frame as he stalked through corridors and gunned down enemies. The result was both dizzying and dull: what felt immersive to a player was borderline illegible to a passive viewer.

Mazin noted, "Doom is also a perfect example of something that you don't actually need to adapt. There's nothing there that you can't generate on your own—"

"Other than the name Doom, and marketing," Druckmann cut in.

"That's the thing," Mazin said. "If what the property is giving you is a name and a built-in thing, you're basically setting yourself up for disaster, because the fans will be, like, 'Where's my fucking thing?' and everybody else will be, like, 'What's Doom?' And then you're in trouble."

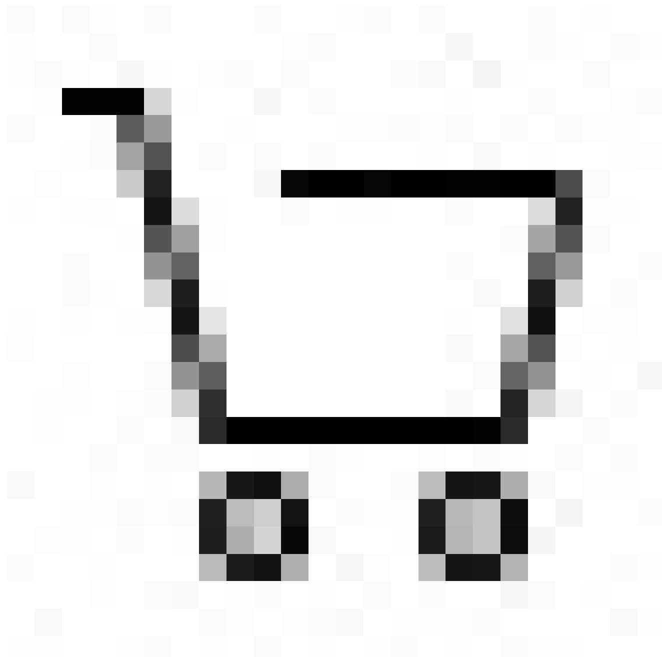


"Seems like we overslept."
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

Share

Link copied

Shop



“The Last of Us,” they believed, would be different. “Hopefully, this will put that video-game curse to bed,” Druckmann said.

Mazin laughed and shook his head. “I’m telling you—it’s gonna make it *worse*.”

In 2001, a Japanese developer released Ico, a minimalist puzzle-based game about a boy and a girl escaping a castle. Though the title sold modestly, it has since achieved cult status; the horror auteur Guillermo del Toro has hailed it as a masterpiece. The player character, the boy, has been locked away by superstitious villagers because of his monstrous appearance. His companion, Yorda, is a princess fleeing an attempt on her life. The actions available to the player are limited but evocative: when you reach out to Yorda to catch her as she falls, the controller vibrates to mimic the tug of her hand. The game’s climax left Druckmann, then a student, transfixed. “You’ve been playing for hours, helping this almost helpless princess,” he recalled. “And then this bridge is opening in such a way that you’re going to die, so you have to turn back and jump to her—and all of a sudden, *she* reaches out, and *she* catches *you*.” Ico had imposed strict rules and then broken them, to great emotional effect.

Druckmann recounted the experience when I met him in Santa Monica at the headquarters of Naughty Dog, the studio behind The Last of Us. Dressed in joggers and a T-shirt, he offered me a tour, showing off the gaming-magazine covers on the walls. Now forty-four, he'd first arrived there nearly twenty years earlier, as an intern. Born in Tel Aviv and raised in the West Bank, he'd immigrated to Miami with his family when he was ten. At Florida State University, he'd started as a criminology major—a precursor, he thought, to an eventual career as a thriller writer—but a computer-science course set him on a different path. After joining Naughty Dog, as a coder, he studied screenplays, sketched out game levels by hand, and petitioned Evan Wells—then his boss, now his co-president—for a spot on the design team. Druckmann believed games could elicit emotions that no other art form could, and he'd played some, mainly indies, that proved it. But, in the early two-thousands, mainstream publishers seemed fixated on spectacle. He saw Alfonso Cuarón's "Children of Men" while working on a game called Uncharted, and, he remembered, "It made me *angry*." The film, a relationship-driven thriller, stood in stark contrast to the "over-the-top sci-fi" being offered by major game developers: "I was, like, Why does nobody in games tell a story like *this*?"

Uncharted 2, the first game that Druckmann both co-wrote and designed, was deemed a breakthrough. The *Times* called it the first action-adventure story to outclass its Hollywood counterparts, declaring, "No game yet has provided a more genuinely cinematic entertainment experience." It sold well and cemented Naughty Dog's reputation; suddenly, the studio could afford to pursue two projects at once. After struggling to reboot an older franchise, Druckmann proposed an alternative project: a post-apocalyptic drama that he'd been quietly nursing for years.

A nature documentary had introduced Druckmann to *Cordyceps*, a genus of fungus that infects ants, hijacking their brains; in The Last of Us, a mutated strain does the same to people. Joel, a single dad from Texas, loses his daughter in the initial chaos of the outbreak. Twenty years later, hardened by her death and working as a smuggler in a quarantine zone in Boston, he's thrown together with Ellie, a scrappy, sweary teen-ager who seems to be immune to the fungus. As they travel across the country, she evinces childlike curiosity, asking questions that Joel can't—or doesn't want to—answer. What began as an alliance of convenience deepens into an almost

familial bond. For Druckmann, the surrogate aspect had been key to the conceit: the two start as strangers in part so that "the *player* has the same relationship to Ellie as Joel does." The game's length allows for their dynamic to change gradually, with Joel developing a protectiveness toward Ellie that—in his mind, and in some players'—justifies amoral acts on her behalf. To heighten that feeling, Druckmann borrowed the twist that had struck him in Ico, and took it further. When incapacitated as Joel, players wouldn't just be helped by Ellie; they would become her. Occupying Ellie's body feels different, and requires a shift in strategy. She's more capable of quick, quiet movements, but she's also comparatively fragile. An attack that Joel could withstand would flatten her.

Druckmann's own daughter was born during the game's development. The intensity of his emotions as a new father helped shape The Last of Us, which became, he said, an exploration of a charged question: "How far will the unconditional love a parent feels for their child go?"

It was an unusual animating impulse for an action game. Uncharted 2, though ambitious, had stuck to a recognizable template: bravura set pieces, quippy dialogue. "Working on Uncharted, it was, 'How do we crank it to eleven?' " Druckmann recalled. "The brainstorms were, 'O.K., here's a helicopter that shoots a bunch of missiles at this building, the building is collapsing while you're in it, and you're shooting a bunch of bad guys. How do we make that playable?' " With The Last of Us, "it was always, 'What's the *least* we need to do to communicate this moment?' " The result was a blockbuster-budget game with an indie feel.

In 2013, the year The Last of Us was released, the industry was dominated by "open-world" role-playing franchises, such as The Elder Scrolls and Grand Theft Auto, which allowed players to pursue only the quests that interested them and to choose whom they killed, romanced, or rescued. Some featured branching narratives, enabling gamers' actions to influence the plot. But endless possibilities came at a cost: they turned protagonists into mere ciphers. The creator of BioShock, another story-rich game from that era, later said that he'd been pushed by higher-ups to replace the troubling, ambiguous finale he'd devised with a stark moral fork in the road; the player's choices would yield one of two endings, one "good" and one "bad." Druckmann was urged to do the same and refused. There were

decisions he knew Joel—a man capable of both tenderness and terrible violence—would never make. "If the player can jump in and be, like, 'No, you're gonna make *this* choice,' I'm, like, 'Now we kind of broke that character,' " he said.

At the time, the staunchly linear storytelling of The Last of Us seemed risky and almost retrograde. Its protagonist wasn't a customizable avatar onto whom players could project their whims; although they could find inventive ways to survive, they couldn't change the fates of the characters around them. But, as reviews poured in, it became clear that critics respected the strength of its narrative—including a climactic, polarizing choice that, in keeping with Druckmann's philosophy, wasn't a choice at all. The game, which went on to win a raft of awards, sold upward of a million copies in its first week.

Although Sony executives were eager to capitalize on the success of The Last of Us, urging Druckmann to "picture it on the big screen," Naughty Dog's history with adaptations had been troubled. In 2008, when Uncharted was optioned, the studio had ceded considerable creative control; the script spent more than a decade passing through the hands of seven directors and twice as many writers before entering production. "At some point, I think we just said, 'You guys run with it, because we can't keep investing time in this,' " Druckmann told me. The final version, which mixed and matched four games' worth of characters and set pieces, was jumbled and inert. Druckmann politely called the movie "fun"—but when the rights were being negotiated for "The Last of Us" he went so far as to make sure that certain plot points were included in the deal. "I helped create Uncharted, but it didn't come from me the way that The Last of Us did," he said. "If a bad version of The Last of Us comes out, it will crush me."

Once Mazin and Druckmann set to work, in early 2020, the biggest question they faced was when to deviate from the source material. Some dialogue was transposed wholesale. But Druckmann also found freedom in the ability to "unplug" from Joel and Ellie's perspectives—something that the game, with its reliance on immersion, had never allowed. Whereas players could piece together what had happened to the rest of the world only through hearsay and environmental clues, the show could venture beyond America and move freely through time, showing characters' lives before disaster

struck. Crucially, however, the adaptation would retain the picaresque structure of the original, in which players progress from area to area, each with its own side characters and ways of life. What had been a standard convention in gaming would give the series a strikingly distinctive feel: rather than sticking with an ensemble, each episode would build a new world, only to blow it up.

The shift to television also enabled a different approach to violence. Druckmann had always intended for the game's brutality to be distressing rather than titillating, but, in a medium where killing is a primary mode of engagement, players can become inured to the cost. As Mazin explained, "When you're playing a section, you're killing people, and when you die you get sent back to the checkpoint. All those people are back, moving around in the same way." At a certain point, they read as obstacles, not as human beings. In the show, such encounters would carry more weight: "Watching a person die, I think, ought to be much different than watching pixels die."

In the game, Joel is near-superhuman, both because play demands it and in order to make the unexpected switch between the action hero and his charge more subversive. But Mazin told Druckmann that the Joel of the series needed to be less resilient. "We had a conversation about the toll Joel's life would have had on him physically," Druckmann recalled. "So, he's hard of hearing on one side because of a gunshot. His knees hurt every time he stands up." Mazin, who is fifty-one, said, "I guess there's a tone where Tom Cruise can do anything. But I like my middle-aged people middle-aged."

The onset of the *covid*-19 pandemic underscored the need for a more grounded approach to cataclysm. "If the world ends, everybody imagines that we all become the Road Warrior," Mazin told me. "We do not! Nobody's wearing those spiked leather clothes. People actually attempt, as best they can, to find what they used to have amid the insanity of their new condition."

In July, 2021, the series entered production, in Calgary, with Pedro Pascal as Joel and Bella Ramsey as Ellie. Mazin, an entertainer by nature, was a chameleon on set, equally at ease making bro-ish small talk with the grips and singing show tunes with the costumer. Druckmann, by contrast, was

quiet and focussed, often pausing to consider his options between takes. He had years of experience directing video games, but, in his native medium, the player, not the creator, dictated the camera angles; now it was his job to guide the viewer's eye. Although he found the process exhilarating, after months of shuttling back and forth to Calgary, he was struggling to fulfill his obligations to Naughty Dog. Feeling confident in Mazin, he decided to return to L.A. and advise from afar. He told me, "Sometimes you have to hand your kid over to someone else and say, 'I trust you to take care of my kid, because I gotta tend to this other thing. *Please* don't fuck it up.' "

In our conversations, Druckmann spoke enthusiastically about cinematic figures such as the director David Fincher and the composer Carter Burwell, but he'd found that people in Hollywood rarely had the same passion for games as he himself had for film. Often, he said, they expressed outright disdain. The first thing that struck Druckmann about Mazin was that he was conversant in both mediums. "He could talk circles around most gamers," Druckmann recalled. The men both prized character relationships above all else. Equally important, Mazin seemed well equipped to handle executives and to settle creative differences. "Craig can be very charming, even when he's saying no," Druckmann explained.

Mazin, the son of New York City public-school teachers, graduated from Princeton with a science degree—then drove to L.A. against their wishes, determined to get into the entertainment industry. One of his first big breaks, "Scary Movie 3," proved to be a nightmare: Bob Weinstein, its producer, called at all hours and showed up on set unannounced, adding and changing scenes. Mazin became known as a writer of parody films and crude comedies that performed well at the box office but received largely negative reviews. He also worked regularly as a script doctor. Though such emergency operations could be thrilling, he said, "I started feeling the tension of being better than the things I was working on." His decades in features taught him to be protective of story and particular about execution. "The purest process is the writing," Mazin told me. "Everything that comes after that is corrosive."

By 2015, he had saved enough money to take a risk—namely, pitching "Chernobyl" and jumping to television. HBO, too, considered the project a gamble: it paid him less for the entire series than a studio had recently given

him for a week and a half of uncredited rewrites. “I had never written TV,” he said. “I had never written drama. I had never written history. It worked—but no one had any expectation that it would.”

Before “The Last of Us” came together, a video-game adaptation seemed an unlikely next step for Mazin. In 2018, Swan, the PlayStation executive, had offered him the rights to an array of titles—all of which he’d declined. Like Druckmann, he had thought deeply about the problems facing the genre. “One of the major contributors to the curse is the fact that a lot of video games are already derivative of movies,” he told me. Halo borrowed from “Aliens”; Tomb Raider is a gender-flipped “Indiana Jones.” Returning to the medium where such story formulas had originated was like running text through Google Translate and back: each iteration came out more garbled than the last. Conversely, there were experiences that couldn’t be reproduced outside of games. The chief delight of open-world titles, Mazin told me, was the opportunity to craft a story of one’s own—or to forgo narrative entirely. “I love the ability to wander, to do *nothing*, in Skyrim,” he said, of an Elder Scrolls game. “That is not translatable!” By contrast, “The Last of Us was always a story where the story comes first.”

In October, I met with Mazin and his producing partner, Jacqueline Lesko, at a post-production office in Burbank. They were about to review HBO’s notes on an episode with the editors Timothy Good and Emily Mendez. In the editing bay, a poster board was emblazoned with the phrase “*negative space”*: a Druckmannism intended to stave off visual and verbal clutter. (Good explained it, affectionately, as “a fancy way of saying silence.”) Mazin clutched a printout of an e-mail relaying HBO executives’ feedback. Most of the notes were easy to accommodate, but he balked at a suggestion about the episode’s climax, in which Joel enters a desperate firefight. Mazin said, “What they’re asking for—and we have the shots—is more, like, ducking, shooting, ducking, shooting. But that’s something that Neil and I feel was a good removal. And we’re just gonna say to them no. Because it looks cheesy. It just looks like network TV.”

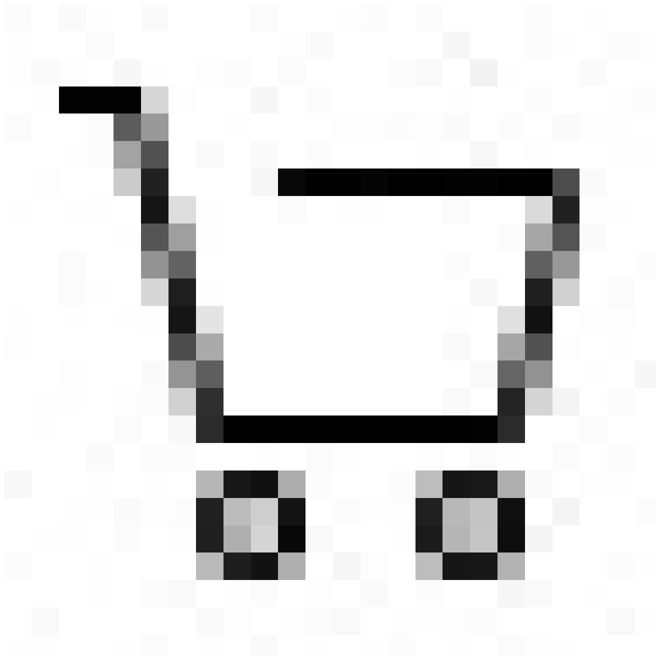


Cartoon by Mick Stevens

Share

Link copied

Shop



“It just cheapens it,” Good said. “It makes it, like, ‘Predator.’ ” The emphasis, he argued, should be on the scene’s emotional thrust.

Mazin nodded and said, “Joel’s skill with evading bullets is the least important thing. Which, by the way, is where video-game adaptations have gone wrong so many times—they try to replicate the action. It’s just the wrong medium. That’s that. This is this.”

Despite its focus on relationships, The Last of Us is still a horror story set in a ruined landscape. For the adaptation, visual effects would be crucial. Early in the process, Naughty Dog developers had shared research they’d conducted while building the world of the game, from maps of quarantine zones to a time line of the *Cordyceps* infection’s progression. At first, *Cordyceps* hosts can pass for human, but, as mycelial filaments penetrate the brain, the victims become more alien in appearance, disfigured by a fungal bloom that ruptures their skull—an oddly entrancing form of body horror. The game’s overgrown cities were informed by “The World Without Us,” a book that blends science journalism and speculative fiction, examining how environments might degrade if humans were to vanish; to achieve the same effect on a grand scale, HBO gave the series a budget exceeding that of each of the first five seasons of “Game of Thrones.”

The look of “The Last of Us” hewed closely to its source material. When a script called for an infected individual unlike those seen in the game, the show’s team consulted with Naughty Dog’s concept artists. One afternoon in October, Mazin and Lesko sat in the dimly lit office of Alex Wang, the series’s visual-effects supervisor, with Druckmann and others joining via Zoom, to assess the results.

As they reviewed the latest renderings of the new variant, Druckmann worried that it looked “too cute.” Mazin assured him that the creature would appear monstrous onscreen, promising to change course if it didn’t. “As long as we say it’s never gonna look silly,” Druckmann said.

“She has to be terrifying,” Mazin agreed. At the same time, he noted more humanizing aspects of the design: the clothes the host would be wearing; the way her hair would be darkened, after years underground. “These are the things that make my heart sing,” he said.

In the game, the infected exist only as enemies to be avoided or defeated, and they are glimpsed primarily in frantic, brutal encounters. In the adaptation, lingering shots would let viewers appreciate the creatures’ strange beauty—and even acknowledge their interiority. One early script briefly adopted the perspective of an infected man, whom Mazin describes in almost loving terms: “He lifts his head. The sun shines warmth on his face. He rises slightly toward it. A soft breeze flutters through his hair. *This is a living creature in a living world*.”

Not long after the VFX meeting, Mazin, Lesko, and a group of editors and mixers gathered for the final phase of the sound-design process, during which they reviewed each episode, identifying errors and inconsistencies. That morning, the team buzzed with excitement and trepidation; one person asked me whether I cried easily. Mazin—who’d asked the same question the previous night, warning that the rough cut had reduced him to tears—answered confidently that I did not.

The seventy-four minutes that followed mark the show’s boldest departure from its source material. In the game, Joel and Ellie encounter a man, Bill, who lives alone in an abandoned town, rigging it with traps to keep the masses—infected or otherwise—at bay. The player learns of Bill’s onetime

partner, Frank, only in passing; the fact that their relationship was romantic is scarcely hinted at. The series gives the men's love story room to breathe. Half an hour in, Lesko began to weep. Mazin, smiling, slid a tissue box toward her.

Later, Druckmann and I discussed the new treatment of Bill and Frank. Throughout the show's development, his philosophy had been that the greater the divergence from the game, the more it had to justify itself emotionally. "As awesome as that episode is, there are going to be fans who are upset by it," he said. Some devotees would turn on the series at the first sign of infidelity. Nevertheless, it had been easy for Druckmann to say yes to the new arc: "To me, the story we tell is authentic to the world. It's authentic to the themes that we're talking about." Mazin had described the couple as an embodiment of the show's overarching interest in "outward love and inward love—the people who want to make everybody better, and the people who want to protect *particular* people at any cost."

A decade ago, when Druckmann was preparing to release The Last of Us, he was unsure how it would be received by an audience trained to expect something else. "I kept thinking to myself, I don't want it to end on a cliffhanger, because I don't know if we'll make a sequel," he said, "and I don't want to make any compromises that I'll regret." On the eve of the show's release, he felt the same way: "If everybody else hates it, I don't care—because I love it."

Still, he was bullish about the show's prospects. "I think it will change things," he said. "Sometimes adaptations haven't worked because the source material is not strong enough. Sometimes they haven't worked because the people making it don't *understand* the source material." Whenever screenwriters gut-renovate a property, he observed, it rarely ends well: "You think you need to fix it, and in trying to fix it you change too much, or you've lost what made it special." But Hollywood's relationship to video games, he thought, was changing by degrees. Partly, it was the result of a generational shift: more film and TV professionals had grown up playing them. There was also an increasing flow of talent between the industries. Ten years earlier, he'd surprised his teammates by persuading Gustavo Santaolalla, an Oscar-winning composer, to score The Last of Us. For its sequel, he'd enlisted Halley Gross, best known for HBO's "Westworld," as

his co-writer. Druckmann's own approach had changed as a result. He had continued to recruit from television, and made it clear to a cinematographer on "The Last of Us" that the door was open if she ever wanted to jump mediums. His next project, he revealed, was a game that was "structured more like a TV show" than anything else Naughty Dog had made—for which he'd taken a highly unusual step. He wasn't writing the script alone, or with a single partner. He was assembling a writers' room. ♦

By Molly Ringwald

By Michael Schulman

By Anthony Lane

By Daniel A. Gross

Poems

- **“The Days”**
- **“Eshu or Ambition”**

By Adrienne Su

Audio: *Read by the author.*

If only I could live my life, not write it,
I'd have double the experience

and be better at nothingness, at being present.
The page, I once believed, offers permanence,

sanctifying time, making it longer,
but now I see my words as susceptible,

even if digital, to fire, flood, misplacement.
To misinterpretation. To accidental

download by enemy. I don't yet want them
to be lost, but I dread the possibility

that they won't self-destruct at the end
of my life, or the end of my lucidity.

Maybe I've been using paper all wrong,
committing to ink what should live in my head,

which is part of my body, which will not last.
Long ago, in college, a friend once said

he would never keep a journal; he preferred
to live in the moment. Back home in June,

I threw the lot of them, dating back to childhood,
into a rose-red shopping bag—we reused

every one—then put the bag out with the trash.
Thank the stars or our thrift for its luminosity:

my mother asked what was in it, then ran
down the driveway, hauled it back up. Her family

had once lost everything. She knew what I wanted
to be, what I already was. “You have to keep them!”

she yelled. She never yelled. Even my friend,
hearing it later, said the same. What worked for him

might not be right for me. He loved to argue
and was always there, vociferous, ready to engage,

while I was too receptive, too easily swayed,
though I often swatted back. That’s what college

is for, the wisdom goes, late-night conversation
with challenging peers. A few years later,

we were no longer friends, not through conflict
but cliché: he had wanted more, I had demurred,

and then there was nothing to say. But maybe
I’d been partial to aspects of his attention—

maybe all the platitudes were true. I had failed
to consider, despite constant reflection,

what my being there must have conveyed.
Reflection is simply an image, a face in a mirror;

to look upon is not the same as to examine.
Perhaps there is such a thing as a neutral observer.

Each night, I had written *Here is what happened*
like a kid whose pen makes her small life exciting,

then gone on mistaking the plot for the story,
as if the point of writing were writing.

By Joshua Rothman

By Amanda Petrusich

By Marion Renault

By Lauren Collins

By **Kwame Dawes**

Audio: *Read by the author.*

Robert Johnson walked to the crossroads,
the place where the spirits chatter,
and there he met a large Black man, some called him Satan,
some called him Legba, some called him Blues.
But, whatever he was, he took Robert Johnson's guitar,
and he played the guitar, and played it well,
and when Robert Johnson returned to the land
of the living, the small towns, the juke joints, the bars,
and the fields of elation and suffering,
he was transformed in ways that let folks know
that he left something behind with that big Black man.
There is a faint line between gratitude and loathing,
the self, turning in on itself—for what does it deserve?
And it is not even a question in search of an answer,
for the answer, elegant as a prayer, is as ancient
as the pathologies of desperate people in search
of a cult of hubris that says we cannot make
of ourselves what we are not. It bears saying,
for the sake of this art, that Robert Johnson
is me, though my triumph was to leave the crossroads
intact. No one offered me the genius of fingers—
I waited, and the big Black man set the guitar down,
walked away with his bowlegs and strut, tossing
back, "Dat ting is out of tune." So there is that.
Back in the square, no one turned their faces
from the glow of me, a few polite nods,
and the dogs moved along with their doggy
life, as the ancients like to say; and me,
I returned to my hut, sat and watched the world
pass me by, my heart thick with love in search
of a home. Perhaps this is ambition, this persistent
hunger. Today is a day of stomach cramps,
the hollow melancholia of the interim, the slough
between mountains, and this, too, is what it must be.

By Dan Fitzpatrick

By James Wood

By Hannah Goldfield

By Blythe Roberson

Profiles

- **How the Artist Kehinde Wiley Went from Picturing Power to Building It**

How the Artist Kehinde Wiley Went from Picturing Power to Building It

His portrait of Obama sparked a nationwide pilgrimage. Now he's establishing an arts empire of his own.

By Julian Lucas



Soliciting pedestrians in the Matongé neighborhood of Brussels, Kehinde Wiley, forty-five, looked more like a sidewalk canvasser than he did a world-famous artist. He sidled up to strangers in an orange hoodie and lime-green Air Jordans, extending a hand and flashing a gap-toothed grin. In nearly fluent French, he explained that he wanted to paint them, and offered to pay three hundred euros if they came in for a photo shoot the following afternoon. Most passersby ignored him or gave excuses: jobs, parking meters, and even a preference for being pictured exclusively from behind. For those who stopped, Wiley produced an exhibition catalogue, flipping through pages of classically posed portraits with models who were Black like them.

It was early April, still freezing in the medieval city that Charles Baudelaire thought full of "everything *bland*, everything sad, flavorless, asleep." On the

Chaussée de Wavre, a busy street lined with ads for cheap wire transfers and "100% Brazilian Hair," many responded warily to the artist's invitation. "You did these?" some asked. Others wanted to know if they could dress as they pleased. "It's your portrait," Wiley assured one skeptic. "Oh, is it?" the man replied. Another prospect not only refused but ejected Wiley from a multistory complex of barbershops and wig emporiums, jabbing him in the chest with an indignant forefinger as he warned that it was no place for an artist.

Wiley took a drag from his cigarette—Benson & Hedges, the brand he's smoked since high school—and then waved his assistant, cameraman, and studio manager down the block. Rejection keeps him humble, the artist insisted. But he also felt certain that those who walked past would eventually see his work and have a different reaction: "Holy shit, I missed out on that?"

Among the people whom Wiley did persuade, the clincher was often his Presidential portrait of Barack Obama, confidently seated before a flowering wall of greenery. Everybody knew that face—but who was this painter, coming on like a hustler in the city of spies and chocolatiers? He explained his background to a candidate from Congo: "My father is Nigerian, my mother is American, and I'm lost."

Wiley excels at the pickup line, a crucial ingredient in a practice that parallels cruising. "I'm an artist and you're a work of art," he told a man named Patrick, who was sipping a beer in sunglasses and a fur-trimmed leather coat. The very image of an unflappable *sapeur*—Congolese French for "dandy"—he was still so excited by Wiley's attention that he dragged him off to meet a group of friends. They subjected the artist to a raucous sidewalk interrogation.

"Just Black people?" one man challenged.

"Black people with some style," Wiley answered.

"Hood stuff, basically," another flung back.

"No, *you* have to show up and decide," Wiley said.

He played it cooler with a willowy young woman named Emerance, who was sitting on a railing with a glass of red wine.

“A lot of it is by chance, not because you’re some superstar,” Wiley said.

“I’m a superstar to my mom,” she replied.

There was even a man who was offended by the artist’s fee. He’d do the sitting free, for the love of beauty.

Wiley’s portraits single out ordinary Black people for color-saturated canonization, turning spontaneous encounters on streets across the world into dates with art-historical destiny. A mother in New York might become Judith holding the head of Holofernes; a dreamy Senegalese youth, Caspar David Friedrich’s “Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog.” The artist revels in embodying chance, the butterfly effect that leads from everyday life to gilt-framed immortality. “In every male ejaculate there’s a possibility to populate an entire city like New York,” he told me in one of our conversations, alluding to the golden sperm that adorned his career-making portraits of young men in Harlem. “Every single person that’s around is winning some cosmic game.”

Few have won bigger than Wiley, whose good fortune has taken him from an enfant terrible of the early two-thousands, when he became known for transfiguring hip-hop style into the idiom of the Old Masters, to one of the most influential figures in global Black culture. He was already collected by Alicia Keys and the Smithsonian when his official portrait of Obama, unveiled in 2018, sparked a nationwide pilgrimage. Now, following the success of Black Rock Senegal, a lavish arts residency he’s established in Dakar—soon to be joined by a second location, in Nigeria—Wiley is shifting the art world’s center of gravity toward Africa with a determination that combines the institution-founding fervor of Booker T. Washington and the stagecraft of Willy Wonka. No longer just painting power, he’s building it.

In Brussels, Wiley was searching for models to confect into the image of royalty for a site-specific show proposed by the city’s Oldmasters Museum. The challenge was familiar. Just as Black communities are everywhere, so,

too, are highbrow collections thirsting for “relevance”—a coincidence that keeps Wiley in constant demand. It’s hard to think of an artist who’s done more split-screen shows with dead predecessors: Wiley and Thomas Gainsborough, Wiley and Artemisia Gentileschi, Wiley and Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux. Just before we met in Brussels, the online arts journal Hyperallergic published an April Fool’s Day article announcing that a museum had solved racism with an acquisition of his work, quoting an imaginary official who declared, “We think this one Kehinde Wiley painting is going to do the trick.”



“O.K., you can tell your truth, but then I want to tell my truth right after.”
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

Share

Link copied

Shop

The artist is well aware of his appeal to institutions navigating cultural renovations. “There’s nothing as anachronistic as a museum or a symphony or a ballet,” he said, on a later drive through Brussels. “How do these places

survive? By creating spaces for young people," and finding ways to "open up to new blood and new imagery."

Our conversation drifted to the British Royal Family. Wiley's assistant played a video of Prince William dancing in Belize, rigidly jerking his hips amid a colorfully dressed crowd. "Oh, my!" the artist cooed. The video had gone viral during a disastrous good-will tour of the Caribbean, which sparked protests and calls for reparations. "They're riding roughshod over the entire reason why they get to be there, which is enslaved human beings," Wiley said. "It's not cute."

In Matongé, whose large immigrant population lives not far from Belgium's royal palace, Wiley's cameras and clipboards scared some people away. But a mysterious entourage also exerts a certain magnetism. "What happens is that we start to become a spectacle," the artist explained. "People just want to know what's going on." A shy young man carrying baguettes and a blue gym bag walked by several times before surrendering to curiosity.

Wiley seemed to gain confidence with each encounter. He isn't a tall man, but his affable demeanor and slightly rakish appearance—piratical goatee, distinctive comma shaved into wax-flattened hair—exude charisma. His mellow voice glides and hums between phrases: at times, picking a careful path through a thorny garden; at others, enveloping the listener in warm complicity. Every so often, his cautious playfulness yields to outbursts of mischief: deadpan impressions; abrupt talk-show belly laughs; and, when it came to me and my questions, the ironic metacommentary of someone keenly sensitive to portraiture's artifice.

We ended the night at Chez Malou, a Congolese eatery promisingly emblazoned with the face of a no-nonsense matron next to an enormous hot pepper. The entourage feasted on pork bits, tilapia, and viscous okra soup. At one point, Wiley, a devoted angler, broke the head off a fish smothered in onion sauce. He identified it, from the bones, as a catfish.

Fourteen models turned up the next day at a nondescript studio. Wiley's assistant unpacked costume jewelry; his photographer, Brad Ogbonna, installed lights; and his manager, Georgia Harrell, distributed cash and contracts. Wiley sipped coffee and perused a sourcebook of reference

images compiled by his research interns, applying Post-its to those he planned to use. A sepia photograph showed King Leopold II with a hand tucked in his jacket; in an oil painting, a boy wearing lacy crimson trousers held hands with his mother, a smug duchess. I asked Wiley whether it mattered if an art work he adapted was any good. “It can be total crap, as long as it’s a great pose,” he replied. “Nobody’s going to be looking at the source.”

Yesterday’s strangers filled out paperwork, dressed to the nines, the ones, and everything in between. Patrick, the *sapeur*, still wearing sunglasses, arrived in a black velvet jacket with gold embroidery, bringing a friend whose logo-covered kit from Moschino made him look like a race-car driver. Emerance, in a floral sheath dress and pink heels, lamented the gentrification of Matongé, which she ironically described as “the famous African street.” Wiley gave brief remarks, omitting the project’s historical background to avoid poisoning the vibe.

Under Leopold II, the so-called builder king, Brussels battened on profits from the ivory and rubber trades, brutally extracted from the Congo Free State—which covered much of present-day Democratic Republic of Congo—in a terror that killed millions. His equestrian likeness still overlooks Matongé, testament to a bloody legacy that has made Brussels home to one of the largest Little Africas in Europe. Wiley’s show takes inspiration from Leopold’s obsession with Congolese flora. The monarch maintained a sprawling network of greenhouses at his palace in the city’s suburbs, where he tried to cultivate rare plants from his African fiefdom.

Most of the transplants died—an allegory, in Wiley’s view, for the failure of the colonial project. One of the artist’s calling cards is what he terms botanical filigree, a vegetal backdrop that surrounds, or even entwines, his sitters. For the Brussels exhibition, he’s deploying the motif in bronze and marble, enclosing human figures in glass “greenhouse pods” that evoke Leopold’s folly. “I wanted to re-create the horror of it but infuse it with vitality,” he explained in one of our conversations, envisioning contemporary Afro-Europeans as signs of “historical continuity and resistance.”

Now they took the stage in a whirl of tableaux vivants. The baguette boy became a clingy nymph in a gender-swapped rendition of Jacques-Louis David's "The Farewell of Telemachus and Eucharis," pressing his cheek against a young woman's shoulder as Wiley delicately adjusted the position of his foot. The artist modelled a regal stance for the race-car driver, who grinned sheepishly and made a finger gun with his hand. Wiley laughed so hard that he actually slapped his knees.



"Portrait of Jorge Gitoo Wright," 2022.Art work © Kehinde Wiley / Courtesy Sean Kelly

"It's more like this," Wiley said, once he'd recovered his composure. "*Très* . . ."—he thrust his chest forward, threw down his hands, scowled disdainfully, and sniffed. Later, he practiced a balletic half-turn with Emerance, cupping his joined hands in an expression of feminine poise.

The models posed for sculptures on an enormous lazy Susan. Ogbonna worked the camera as Wiley, crouching, turned the apparatus, shouting "Take!" with clockwork regularity. (The artist's studio uses software to combine the shots into three-dimensional renderings, which are subsequently printed in polymer clay.) At certain moments, he looked like a supplicant kneeling before his subjects; at others, a potter throwing them on the wheel. Afrobeats played continuously. One model's frozen figure revolved to the slick rhythms of "Monalisa," by Lojay and Sarz: "Baby

follow my commanding like zombie, Go down on me with your coca body . . . you can’t run away.”

Wiley raced back and forth between stage and camera as though running speed drills. First, the quilted jacket came off; then the Lacoste sweatshirt. At one point, sweat caused hair wax to run into his eyes, and he briefly interrupted the shoot to call for a Kleenex.

“That’s fucking amazing,” he told Ogbonna as they clicked through shots. “You can see them as sculptures already.”

The fifth of six children in a struggling single-parent household, Kehinde Wiley was born in South Central Los Angeles in 1977. He and his fraternal twin, Taiwo, were the offspring of a fleeting campus romance between Freddie Mae Wiley, an African American linguistics major, and Isaiah Obot, a Nigerian studying architecture, both at U.C.L.A. Obot had returned to Nigeria when Freddie Mae gave birth, and ignored her requests for a list of baby names in his native Ibibio. Determined to preserve a sense of their Nigerian heritage, she gave the two boys traditional Yoruba names for twins.

Wiley made his first art works on the walls of the family’s home on Jefferson Avenue. The Wileys, who sometimes relied on welfare, didn’t have much money. But Freddie Mae supplemented their income by converting the house into what the artist fondly described as a “ ‘Sanford and Son’-style” antique store, which she piously dubbed My Father’s Business. Wiley grew up immersed in his mother’s business: vintage clothes, claw-foot furniture, Afrocentric statues, and antique tchotchkes, all laid out for sale in an overgrown greenhouse.

Wiley learned Spanish from customers, composition by sketching merchandise, and cooking from Julia Child, whose shows inspired him to take over in the family kitchen before he was ten. “Within a year, he was a better cook than my mom,” Taiwo told me. “I hate to see it published, but it’s true.” Recognizing his precocity, Freddie Mae enrolled Wiley in art classes, and took him on excursions to museums like the Huntington Library, in San Marino, where he fell in love with eighteenth-century English portraiture, even as he struggled with a feeling of exclusion from the rarefied white world it evoked. (The Huntington recently exhibited Wiley’s

answer to Thomas Gainsborough directly opposite “The Blue Boy.”) A study-abroad program in the Soviet Union further broadened his horizons, and when he returned Wiley matriculated at the L.A. County High School for the Arts.

“I understood very early about the social component to art,” Wiley told me. He staged his first solo show at the house before he’d even graduated, treating visitors from around the neighborhood to a sparkling-cider reception. Every painting sold; when a family friend offered to buy a work that Wiley had made especially for Freddie Mae—a portrait of a woman in a field of flowers—the teen-age artist encouraged his mother to take the deal. “I wouldn’t even say that art is the greatest thing that Kehinde will accomplish before the Lord promotes him,” Freddie Mae told me. “I see him as a great entrepreneur.”

The sales helped pay for his room and board at the San Francisco Art Institute, where he earned a bachelor’s degree, in 1999. That year, he entered the M.F.A. program at Yale; his friends there included other now prominent artists like Wangechi Mutu and Mickalene Thomas. “We all sought each other out as the few Black students in our departments,” Mutu told me via e-mail. She and Wiley met on the dance floor at parties and visited each other’s studios, where she recalls being impressed by the intricacy of his then small compositions. He remembers them less charitably. “I was making, like, really embarrassing allegorical paintings that involved onions and watermelons,” Wiley told me. “Assuming that people understand the importance of a citrus fruit in a painting, or an Italian cypress or something—it’s just not gonna fly.”

He experimented with painting people from Black neighborhoods in New Haven, prompted by the constant racial profiling that he faced on campus. Nowadays, portraiture is enjoying a renaissance, but at the time Wiley’s decision to represent people—especially those who weren’t white—was a bold break with the era’s conceptualism. At first, Wiley hedged the transition, trying to “justify figuration” by suspending his models in crisp color fields. That changed after a studio visit from Kerry James Marshall, whose critique profoundly altered Wiley’s approach to the relationship between figure and ground. “ ‘Enough with the sharp edges. They’re cold, they’re clinical, and they say a lot about you,’ ” Wiley recalls the older artist

saying. The comment helped inspire his work's distinctive entanglement of decorative patterns with limbs and skin. Wiley realized that the interplay could stand in for other relationships: race and society, man and marketplace, model and artist.



"Hey, looks like I'm going to be stuck here awhile. Can you get dinner started and finish raising the kids?"
Cartoon by Teresa Burns Parkhurst

Share

Link copied

He moved to New York in 2001, arriving with little money and a romantic vision of life in the big city. Brian Keith Jackson, a novelist from Louisiana, remembers meeting Wiley when he came to a party at the writer’s apartment with a plastic bottle of gin. Jackson made him sign it, and from then on the two were inseparable. In the years since, he has accompanied Wiley on travels from China to Brazil, and written several essays for his catalogues. “There weren’t many Black gay men that were the face of something,” Jackson told me. “We just struck out on the city, because you needed that support.”

Wiley also found community at the Studio Museum, where, in 2001, he began a yearlong residency. He’d arrived at a propitious moment. Thelma Golden, then best known for her landmark exhibition “Black Male,” had just started her tenure as chief curator of the storied Harlem organization. “Kehinde is one of those artists who was fully formed from the start,” Golden recalled. She took an interest in the young painter partially because his work paralleled her research for her exhibition “Black Romantic,” which explored the tension between popular genres of idealizing portraiture and the conceptualism of institutions like her own. In the catalogue, she wrote, “I was suspicious of the notion of the ‘real’ or the authentic that many of the

artists strive to present"; she found it full of "overwrought sentiment" and "strident essentialism." Yet she also wanted to reckon with its appeal.

Wiley's work bridged the two worlds. At the time, he was working on a series called "Conspicuous Fraud," which explored the commodification of identity through depictions of young men with explosively branching Afros against monochromatic backdrops. In the most celebrated work from the series, a man in a suit closes his eyes as his smoke-like hair fills the canvas: a dream of escape, or a silent struggle with double consciousness. Golden featured the painting in her exhibition, earning Wiley immediate notice. In an interview for the exhibition's catalogue, he declared, "I want to aestheticize masculine beauty and to be complicit within that language of oppressive power while at once critiquing it."

Harlem was a revelation, Wiley recalled, "teeming with this sexy black young energy" that strutted down the sidewalk. At the museum, he often slept in his studio, overlooking 125th Street, papering the walls with Polaroids of men he'd met around the neighborhood. A breakthrough came when he found a Black teen's discarded mug shot and arrest record. Wiley took the photograph home and began to consider the chasm between the aggrandizing conventions of European portraiture—with its kings, saints, and smug gentry—and its perverse opposite in the photo studios of the New York Police Department. What if he reversed the terms, simultaneously demystifying the Western canon and endowing Black youth with Old Master grandiosity?

The breakthrough earned Wiley his first solo museum show when he was just twenty-six. "Passing/Posing" transformed a room at the Brooklyn Museum into a b-boy Sistine Chapel. Arch-shaped portraits depicted men in basketball jerseys posing like Biblical figures. Break-dancers cut up clouds in a mock ceiling fresco called "Go." (Wiley recently reprised the composition in stained glass, for a monumental skylight in the new Moynihan Train Hall.) It was "a sendup of Old Master painting as the ultimate cum shot," Wiley told the art historian Sarah Lewis; many of the young men were surrounded by filigrees of fleurs-de-lis and spermatozoa. The packed opening featured a performance by the Juilliard-trained drag queen Shequida, who sang a Baroque arrangement of Kelis's "Milkshake" accompanied by the Columbia Bach Society. "I had no idea where I was

going to go," Wiley told me, though it was immediately clear that he was going up.

"The future was almost there," an early studio assistant recalled. With fondness and frustration, she and others described a boss who projected a fabulous persona even as he struggled to pay salaries and slept off all-nighters on piles of bubble wrap in a ragged Chelsea studio that doubled as his apartment. Wiley started hiring extra hands—initially, a quartet of Columbia undergraduates—before he had even finished his residency, overwhelmed by a demand for his paintings that quickly outstripped his ability to make them. A division of labor emerged. Wiley cruised Harlem for striking young men, often bringing along a gay assistant or an attractive woman friend. The artist did his own photography. Lacking the equipment to print transparencies, he outlined subjects from projections of ordinary printouts rubbed with Vaseline. Assistants completed the elaborate backgrounds, leaving Wiley to concentrate on the figures.

The team worked at a furious pace. For the gilt patterns, they used a shimmery model paint more often applied to cars than to canvases, and its strong fumes often sent them scrambling to the windows. Wiley was "not interested in quality control," one of the painters told me, pointing out errors in foreshortening figures—an artifact of outlining from projections—and inconsistent sperm motifs in his early work. One assistant found him to be more attentive about his own image; she was struck by a Dolce & Gabbana shirt he'd bought for an opening while she confronted him about an overdue payment. Wiley insists that it was fake; either way, it was a talisman of his determination. "He executes on his ideas," the painter told me. "Everything he said, he did."

"Nothing surprised me," the gallerist Jeffrey Deitch said of Wiley's success. "It was all preordained." What interested Deitch wasn't just the paintings but the persona. Wiley's compositions evoked predecessors like Barkley Hendricks, with his poised, gilt-backed icons of everyday Black style; a tradition of homoerotic photography, dating back to Fred Holland Day and Wilhelm von Gloeden, who posed peasant youths as classical heroes; and the exaggerated gender play of contemporary drag, fashion, and advertising. At the same time, Wiley's reputation conjured up the spectres of Warhol and

Basquiat, collapsing their dance of detached media manipulator and streetwise innocent into a single figure.

Deitch staged Wiley's next hit show, "Rumors of War" (2005), an exhibition of equestrian portraits whose standout, "Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps," became the young artist's signature work. It swapped out the diminutive Corsican general of David's masterwork for a muscular Black man in a headband and fatigues, raising a tattooed arm as he digs his Timberland boots into the stirrups. Deitch arranged its purchase and long-term loan to the Brooklyn Museum, where it hangs in the lobby. Like many other Wileys that crib titles from their inspirations, it now surpasses the original in online search results.

Years before a repentant art world started buying Black art like indulgences, Wiley's rise provoked grumbles. Roberta Smith described his early paintings as "gaudy shams" enjoying "fifteen minutes of fame," and compared the young artist to the fanciful and largely faded French salon painter William-Adolphe Bouguereau. Others saw more commercialism than critique in his slick fantasies, especially once he began collaborating with luxury brands like Grey Goose. Wiley, undaunted, embraced celebrity. He painted LL Cool J for the VH1 Hip Hop Honors, and Michael Jackson, at the singer's own request, portraying him on a white horse, clad in plate mail and serenaded by cherubim. He threw legendary parties, cooking, at one bacchanal, a menu of six quail, four rabbits, three red snappers, and two ducks with the heads left on for about a hundred guests.



“Conspicuous Fraud Series #1 (Eminence),” 2001.Art work © Kehinde Wiley / Courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem

“By the end of the night, we had little gay boys going around with joints and cigarettes and silver platters,” Scott Andresen, an artist friend who co-hosted the gathering, recalled. Wiley’s openings escalated to such an extent that one took place at a Harlem ballroom, and featured voguing demonstrations by members of the House of Xtravaganza. The spectacles were less an extravagance, though, than an investment.

In August, I met Wiley at his SoHo apartment, a cavernous ground-floor loft in a cast-iron building surrounded by galleries and boutiques. It had taken months to pin the artist down. In the past year, he’s travelled to more than a dozen countries on four continents—not only for work but also to relax at his homes in Senegal, Nigeria, and the Catskills.

“I sort of feel like I’m cheating on one life with a different life,” he said of these migrations, each inaugurating a new season of friends and habits. Lately, he has favored Africa; this past February, he and Taiwo celebrated their forty-fifth birthday at a new house in the exclusive Victoria Island neighborhood of Lagos. But when I asked if any particular place was “home” Wiley demurred, saying, “It’s probably about entropy and how warm the seat is since last you’ve sat in it.”

We sat on opposite couches in his high-ceilinged living room, watched by a fun-house hoard of contemporary portraiture. Works by Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Deana Lawson, Shikeith, Mickalene Thomas, and Amoako Boafo—whom Wiley championed after discovering him on Instagram—floated above family photographs and African carvings, one of which supported a heavy Warhol catalogue. Dominating the collection was a recent portrait by Wiley, which depicts a shirtless dark-skinned young man holding a copy of Nancy Isenberg's "White Trash" between his splayed legs.

Wiley offered me a glass of wine and an oversized ice cube, cautioning me to slide it in with care. Broken glass was on his mind; the previous day, contractors had dropped a tool and shattered the skylight in his den, startling the artist and his Afghan hounds, Sudan and Togo. "The vibe is not the same," Wiley said of returning to Manhattan. He moved into the apartment nine years ago but has spent only two months in the city since 2020. Many of his friends and associates have moved elsewhere, and some of those who hadn't—like LL Cool J, whom he'd just seen at a party thrown by the stylist and socialite Legendary Damon—reminded him of another era.

I asked if there were any of his own works that he had wanted but couldn't keep. "Hell yeah," Wiley said, naming a painting from his 2008 exhibition, "Down," which had been acquired by his friend Swizz Beatz. The series reimagined fallen figures like Hans Holbein's "The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb"—a landmark of morbid realism—in a register of down-low homoeroticism, envisioning Black men in attitudes of saintly repose. Beatz's acquisition featured a particularly beautiful figure, Wiley reminisced, with a twisting torso and exposed Hanes briefs beneath a cascade of golden passionflowers. "But where the hell would I hang a twenty-foot painting?"

Then there's his edition of "Rumors of War," the enormous statue of a dreadlocked rider that he created, in 2019, as a riposte to Confederate monuments. (The original, first exhibited in Times Square, is now outside the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, in Richmond.) He's thought about installing it at his new Black Rock campus, in Nigeria, but modesty, so far, has constrained him. "I'd prefer to have it somewhere in the forest," he said, alluding to his property in the Hudson Valley. "I want Black Rock to be less about me."

Wiley doesn't do self-portraits, though not because he shuns the spotlight. "I'm always very suspicious about artists who are ambivalent about recognition," he told me. "The ability to have something to say and reach people? That's a dream." Nevertheless, he prefers having a famous name to having a famous face, and the freedom that comes with directing attention to being its object. The one portrait of Wiley that I saw in his apartment—a heavily Photoshopped print by David LaChapelle—depicts the painter as a macho athlete admiring his own reflection, flanked by Pamela Anderson and the trans performance artist Amanda Lepore.

It's a tellingly chameleonic image. Wiley seems to draw strength from the contradictory glosses that attach to his identity: court painter and populist, iconoclast and canon junkie, crusader for inclusion and art-world cynic. He's a man who seems equally at ease among the people of Ferguson, Missouri—where he painted a series in honor of Michael Brown—and posh friends like the conservative socialite Princess Gloria von Thurn und Taxis.



"Customers who bought this item also bought this item."
Cartoon by Lynn Hsu

Share

Link copied

Shop

Directly behind me was a porcelain statue of Chairman Mao with his legs casually crossed. In 2006, Wiley opened a large studio with a sculpture workshop in Beijing, where he also rented an apartment, learned Mandarin, and started dating a local d.j. This marked the beginning of a transition from

hot-shot painter to diversified global enterprise. Starting in China, Wiley embarked on a series called "The World Stage," an atlas of the Black figure and the world's decorative traditions. During the same period, he expanded into new mediums, like sculpture and stained glass; new Old Masters, like Hans Memling; and, starting in 2011, a new gender, as he returned to Harlem to paint women in custom gowns by the Italian designer Riccardo Tisci. The resulting show, which featured in a documentary, was called "An Economy of Grace." But many critics saw only economies of scale, the endless recycling of a gimmick.

Then, in the mid-twenty-tens, Wiley's career caught a major thermal. Black figuration swept to national prominence, buoyed, from one direction, by the rude awakening of the Ferguson uprising and, from another, by the trickle-down glamour of the Obama White House. The representation of Blackness became a national conversation, reviving the œuvres of Wiley's predecessors, like Kerry James Marshall and Charles White; elevating contemporaries like Kara Walker to stardom; and launching the careers of dozens of young artists, such as Toyin Ojih Odutola, who were challenging the epidermal biases of Western portraiture through formal experiment.

Wiley's glossily photorealistic treatment of Black skin dovetailed perfectly with the era's emerging *peau idéal*. In 2014, the producer Lee Daniels featured his work in the hit television show "Empire." The next year, he received a major survey at the Brooklyn Museum, "A New Republic." It seemed to varnish early provocations with a new sobriety: "Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps" had débuted against the backdrop of the Iraq War in a show that mocked martial masculinity; in 2015, the work was reborn as an insurgent paean to Black resistance. Wiley's idylls of Old Master empowerment also gained relevance in an America presided over by a Black family in a neo-Palladian manse.

On a bureau in the foyer of Wiley's apartment is a photograph of him and Barack Obama. Not long after Wiley's retrospective, the National Portrait Gallery began considering him to paint Obama's Presidential portrait. His selection, announced in October, 2017, was historic: America's first Black President would sit for its first Black Presidential portraitist. For an artist who'd made his mark posing the powerless, the ostensible challenge was depicting a man who wielded the real thing. At the portrait's unveiling, on

Lincoln's birthday the following year, Obama recalled warning Wiley to leave out the "partridges and scepters," teasing the artist that he had "enough political problems without you making me look like Napoleon."

The curtain came down on a bower-side chat with America's supreme confidant. The President sits, sans tie, with arms folded in a posture of vigilant welcome, surrounded by flowers symbolizing Chicago, Hawaii, Indonesia, and Kenya. Obama's feet don't touch the ground; the author of "Dreams from My Father" seems to levitate on an antique chair of the kind that Freddie Mae once stocked among the houseplants at My Father's Business. The artist cried as he thanked his mother from the podium.

Wiley has made many works that imitate devotional icons, but his image of Barack Obama, like Amy Sherald's of Michelle, sparked a national pilgrimage. According to Kim Sajet, the director of the National Portrait Gallery, the portraits tripled the museum's attendance. A security guard observed an elderly woman get on her knees and pray to Obama's portrait. "People cry and say, 'I miss him,' " the guard wrote in a sketch that she shared on Instagram. In June, 2021, the portraits began a five-city tour of museums across the country, drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors. Unveiled in the second year of the Trump Administration, and travelling in the shadow of *COVID*-19, they served, in a way, as a locus of mourning—not for Obama, who was comfortably podcasting and constructing his Presidential library, but for a vision of the country that had withered with his departure from the White House.

Wiley painted Obama solo. But for years most of his portraits have been extensively prepared with others, at coördinating studios in New York, Dakar, and Beijing. The flagship studio occupies a second-floor space near the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway in Williamsburg. When I visited this summer, assistants wearing earbuds filled canvases in silence, sitting at varying altitudes along a wall that runs the length of the room. A young woman added jewel-green birds to an oval-shaped composition with a mask of tape obscuring the central figure. Other works showed only silhouettes, as though their subjects had been raptured from the frame.

The paintings begin life in Photoshop. Wiley sends initial shots of models to a graphic designer, along with decorative motifs and detailed instructions for

creating a backdrop. After the mockup earns his approval, assistants trace it onto the canvas, then begin their painstaking work on the fashion, the flora, and the filigree. Individuals focus on particular works, but also serve as floating detail specialists. The bird painter was brought on for her knowledge of Japanese landscape painting; the clothing expert, who has worked at the studio for seventeen years, doubles as a quality-control inspector, insuring that every Wiley looks like a Wiley. The process has become intuitive, she told me: “I’m his hand, almost like a human printer.”

Generally, by the time a painting reaches Wiley everything except the figure is finished. The artist is free to refine his own specialty: skin, or, in Ellisonian terms, the Blackness of Blackness. Wiley was trained to mix underpainting—a preliminary layer that many artists use as a chromatic keynote—in shades of burnt umber, terra-cotta, and sienna, a spectrum that he described as a “scaffolding” for white skin. After years of working with darker models, he began to experiment with blues and reds, emphasizing the resonances between contrasting hues. “It’s not just pulling up, like, Mars Black,” he said. “You’re creating a series of emotional temperatures that either feel good or don’t.”

Wiley’s surfaces have grown more elaborate even as his themes turn inward. “I’ve sort of inherited my younger self,” he said of his reputation for bombast; in recent years, he’s experimented with smaller canvases, oval frames, and landscape. (“Colorful Realm,” which opens next month at Roberts Projects, in Los Angeles, will depict models in natural settings inspired by the Japanese scroll painter Itō Jakuchū.) Early career motifs have returned in moodier guises: a guarded youth in armor whose dreadlocks tangle with columbines, or an equestrian statue of a rider thrown from his horse.

“Archaeology of Silence,” Wiley’s satellite show at the 2022 Venice Biennale, reprised the odalisques of “Down” as larger-than-life martyrs, in a sepulchral presentation that fused Renaissance funerary luxury with Black grief and grievance. (The show subsequently travelled to the Musée d’Orsay and opens at the de Young Museum, in San Francisco, this coming March.) Moses Sumney sang a Hebrew lament at the star-studded opening, where Chance the Rapper bought a puffer jacket, which he later wore in a music

video, from the exhibition's pop-up store. For Wiley, it was still only a prelude to the year's most important biennial.



"Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps," 2005.Art work © Kehinde Wiley / Courtesy Brooklyn Museum

In May, Wiley made his début in Dakar as a global patron of the arts. His Pan-African Xanadu, Black Rock Senegal, had opened three years earlier, with an all-night party where musicians performed and models walked a floating runway. Henry Taylor painted visitors; Alicia Keys tried on jewelry by the Senegalese designer Sarah Diouf. Wiley boasted in the *Times* that, while photographs of the Met Gala "got old after two days," people were still posting pictures from his celebration weeks after the guests had gone home.

Soon he began welcoming trios of artists for one- to three-month stays, with plans to curate an exhibition of their work at Dak'Art, Africa's longest-running biennial, in 2020. Instead, Wiley spent more than a year with a cohort of fellows in lockdown, sketching employees and captaining weekly fishing trips to pass the time. (At Art Basel, his fish fries have become an institution; Chaka Khan performed at the one he held this year.) The artist grew so attached to life in Senegal that only Naomi Campbell could force him out, with a summons to judge at Lagos Fashion Week. " 'Get your ass on a plane,' " Wiley recalled her saying. "So I got my ass on a plane."

Now he was back, determined to dazzle the rescheduled Dak'Art with a group show called "Black Rock 40." Wiley zipped up and down the Corniche—Senegal's answer to the Pacific Coast Highway—in a flurry of planning and schmoozing: hors d'œuvres at a seaside hotel with a gaggle of returning fellows; a merchandising shoot with local models on a picturesque beach; a charm offensive at the biennial's grand opening, which took place at the Ancien Palais de Justice. Wiley mixed with artists like Barthélémy Toguo and Abdoulaye Konaté in a colonnaded hall open to the breeze, observing that the imposing former courthouse ought to become a permanent art space: "All it would take would be for a bank to get involved."

Dakar was initially a layover on visits to see family in Nigeria. But through the years Wiley fell in love with the storied seaside metropolis, which hosted the continent's first pan-African festival in 1966. Inspired by his formative residency at the Studio Museum, he carved out a foothold in the city eight years ago, buying a vacant waterfront property on the advice of a friend and local museum director named Boubacar Koné. Dakar, with its style and its dynamism, fit his budding project "like a glove," Wiley told me. He recognized that, "just like New York or London," it had the potential to become a place where the "world comes to discover who they are."

Almost every evening of the biennial's opening week ended with cocktails at Black Rock. The pumice-colored compound looks like any other villa from its unmarked entrance, at the end of a quiet alley. But inside is a verdant courtyard of palm, banana-leaf, and monkey-puzzle trees. The buildings were designed by the Senegalese architect Abib Djenne, who took inspiration from the nearby shore's volcanic rocks: three multistory artists' apartments; private studios with panoramic ocean views; and a main house with twenty-foot-high doors of gleaming tropical hardwood.

Wiley calls them the Doors of Return, alluding to the Door of No Return, which commemorates victims of the slave trade, and his nightly gatherings had the air of a glamorous family's never-ending reunion. Guests lounged in an art-filled great room as waiters in black-and-gold uniforms circulated with seafood caught by the host. The window walls offered aquarium views of a patio and a kaleidoscopically lit infinity pool. "This is home," Brian Keith Jackson, the novelist, declared one evening, grandly gesturing toward a group of artists by a unicorn floatie. Nearby, Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, a painter

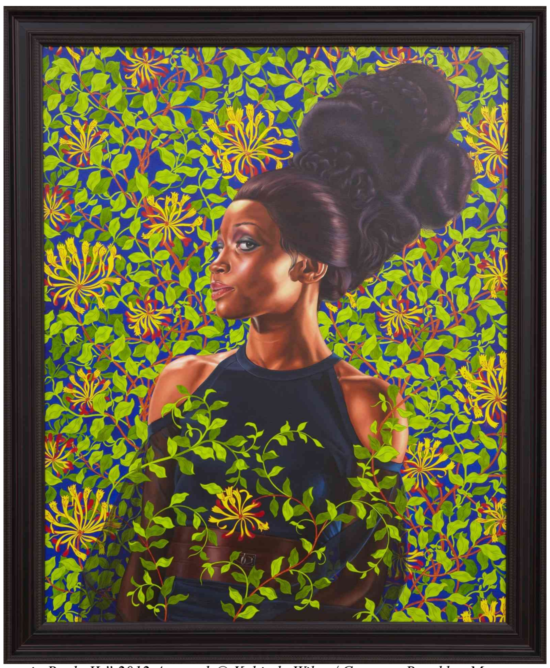
and former fellow, stared out at the ocean, where whitecaps gleamed in the darkness. “This is the shit that changed our lives,” he said.

In the art world, an invitation to Black Rock is something of a golden ticket. The experience is almost genie-like in its breadth of accommodation: chef-prepared meals, a gym and a sauna, bespoke excursions with local guides which fellows have used to study indigo dyeing and Sufi brotherhoods. It’s a land of pure imagination that leaves many overwhelmed with gratitude. (The photographer Nona Faustine described her residency in a guestbook as “the most profound experience of my life, outside of giving birth to my daughter.”) Beyond material assistance and cultural immersion—and, for many, a sense of diasporic homecoming—the residency functions as an entrée into the extended Wiley clan, a carrousel of notables who make Black Rock feel less like an arts nonprofit and more like a royal court. Wiley, Jackson told me, “plays in the vernacular of empire, and he’s positioned himself where he’s the king.”

Absent like Gatsby the first night I visited, Wiley descended from his upstairs residence to mingle on the eve of his exhibition. Dressed in a flowing white shalwar kameez, he strode around the party like the captain of a ship, giving orders to kitchen staff and tsk-tsking his boyfriend—a towering Nigerian model and aspiring designer in a sequinned pink-and-green ensemble—for slipping upstairs: “Another costume change, Kenneth?” (They met on a dating app in Lagos, where Kenneth suspected that his match might be using a celebrity’s identity to catfish.) Wiley finally settled down next to Taiwo and his old friend Scott Andresen on a chaise longue by the pool. Andresen asked the artist about meeting his father for the first time during a trip to Nigeria in 1997. “I thought he was going to be bigger,” Wiley said. “He was a small man with a big desk.”

It was his first trip to Africa. Because he and Taiwo could afford only one ticket between them, Wiley went alone, searching city after city for a man whose face he’d never seen. He finally found his father at the University of Calabar, where he was serving as chair of the architecture department. Wiley filmed the encounter in anticipation of a joyful reunion, but Obot was cagey and skeptical of his intentions—a letdown that inspired a now missing series of portraits. Even so, the trip was pivotal. Wiley met long-lost half siblings and committed more broadly to reëstablishing his African roots.

A project that originated in the search for family has since become inextricable from it. Wiley often cooks meals for the fellows; recently, he began sponsoring the son of a single mother who works for him as a housekeeper, assuming a paternal role in the boy's life. The next stage of Wiley's homecoming odyssey will take him back to Nigeria, where he and Taiwo have built a fifteen-acre estate in a village near their father's ancestral home. "The first thing I do is jump into that river," Wiley said of his visits to the property, which includes fruit orchards, a piggery, and a fishery stocked with tilapia and catfish. "I'm literally going to be a farmer."



"Shantavia Beale II," 2012.Art work © Kehinde Wiley / Courtesy Brooklyn Museum

The plan is for his farm to supply Black Rock Nigeria, a second, larger residency that will open next year in Calabar. "Nigeria is home, so I better show out," Wiley told me, thumbing through architectural renderings on his iPhone. Artists will live in semi-detached town houses, each with its own entrance to a common pool, in a riverside complex shaped like the region's ancient *nsibidi* script. The project has become such an obsession that Wiley demands daily video updates from the construction site. And he hasn't ruled out plans for residencies in other reaches of the diaspora: today, Black Rock Nigeria; tomorrow, Black Rock World.

"I wouldn't bet against him," his friend Antwaun Sargent, a director at Gagosian, told me. He situated Black Rock in a growing constellation of

residencies established by Black artists on both sides of the Atlantic, including Amoako Boafo, Theaster Gates, Rick Lowe, Julie Mehretu, and Yinka Shonibare. Their retreats are beachheads in an art world that still feels as fickle as the tides in its embrace of Black artists. "People always talk about, like, 'It's just a moment,' or 'We've been here before,' " Sargent said. "What they're missing is that this time folks are building really, really dynamic institutions." He praised Wiley for serving as a bridge between scenes, continents, and generations. "The job isn't just for one of us to make it," he concluded. "The job is to create a network."

More than fifteen hundred people attended the "Black Rock 40" opening at the Douta Seck cultural center in Dakar's Medina district. There were young stars like the designer Telfar Clemens and heavyweights like Sir David Adjaye, the Ghanaian British architect. The V.I.P.s networked on a private veranda as Wiley, just across a crowded lawn fringed with palm trees, jogged onstage in a wax-print suit. "*Bon soir*, Dakar!" he exclaimed. Later, the Nigerian singer Teni kicked off the entertainment with a song for all the stressed-out creatives. "Sometimes it feels like success is a drug," she crooned.

Black Rock fellows posed for pictures inside the exhibition, where paintings and photographs shared space with sculptures and video installations. Near the entrance was a quilted canvas by the Ghanaian artist Zohra Opoku, depicting a winged Egyptian figure. In the middle of the room, Hilary Balu, a Congolese artist, exhibited two reliquary statues made of unrefined sugar, an allusion to the slave-trade wealth reflected in the lavish tomb of a Kongolese monarch.

Snapshots ricocheted across Instagram, but more important networks were forming in the room, where the dance between art and material power—so integral to Wiley's paintings—seemed to have leaped off the canvas. Among those present were bankers, an oil executive, the U.S. Ambassador, and two French-Togolese sisters with connections to major museums, who had previously introduced Wiley to Togo's President, Faure Gnassingbé.

The introduction was for a show that has been in the works for more than a decade, and which opens next September, at the Musée du Quai Branly, in Paris. Called "A Maze of Power," it will feature portraits of current and

former heads of state from across Africa, paired with videos that document the negotiations around each sitting.

“I didn’t really want to make a show about applauding the nice guy who’s done good things in Africa,” Wiley told me; instead of moralizing, he aims to dissect the self-presentation strategies of those who rule. The labyrinthine exhibition space will evoke the “trappings of power.” Wiley also plans to incorporate landscape into the paintings, offering glimpses of the African cityscapes that are home to a rapidly growing fraction of the world.

Wiley wouldn’t disclose his subjects. But in the past decade he’s had audiences with Presidents Macky Sall, of Senegal; Nana Akufo-Addo, of Ghana; Alpha Condé, of Guinea (until he was overthrown, last year, by a military junta); and Paul Kagame, of Rwanda, whom he visited in March. (Kagame, who officially won his last election with ninety-nine per cent of the vote, wants to be painted as a herdsman, possibly an allusion to the cattle-based iconography of Rwanda’s traditional monarchs.) All were reassured that there would be no irony or political agenda in the portraits—a complex promise from an artist who has always worked at the bleeding edge between critique and complicity.

Wiley’s detractors often invoke a quotation from Audre Lorde: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” The appeal of a Black-cast canon has lost currency at a time when the promised panacea of “Black faces in white spaces” has come under fire. In 2018, when Beyoncé and Jay-Z filmed a video for their single “Apeshit” at the Louvre, it was a triumph of Wiley’s new Old Masters aesthetic. Skeptics wondered what was so revolutionary about two billionaires gallivanting through a treasury of art.

But Wiley, who once described himself as a manufacturer of “high-priced luxury goods for wealthy consumers,” never promised anyone empowerment. In a way, his has been the classic fate of the court painter: conscripted as a propagandist—by the royalists, the reformers, and the revolutionaries—when his real passion is for capturing the fleeting postures of his era. One of the most striking sculptures in “Archaeology of Silence” depicts a young woman lying in what appears to be a mausoleum’s niche; it takes a few moments to notice that she is holding an iPhone. Wiley looks forward to the “decay” of these time-stamped touches. “I love seeing those

frilly collars in old Dutch paintings," he said, comparing them to the oversized sportswear in his early works. "The culture is always changing."

Last winter at the National Gallery in London, I saw Wiley's exhibition "The Prelude," an exploration of nature and the sublime which envisions Black wanderers amid the mountains and seascapes of such nineteenth-century Romantics as J. M. W. Turner, Winslow Homer, and Caspar David Friedrich. For most of his career, Wiley conspicuously omitted landscape from his paintings, pointedly substituting decorative patterns for the land and chattels that loom behind many Old Master portraits. It was a liberation of style from property and privilege. Recently, though, he's abandoned the constraint. The shift is a call for Black people to take up space in the world, which doubles as a wink at his own vertiginous climb.

The exhibition culminated in a six-screen video installation, which I watched in a darkened room just off the main gallery. In the film, a group of Black Londoners hike through glacial Norway, struggling against the elements and their allegorical exclusion from a sharp white background of snowscapes. An extended sequence of closeups show the models smiling against a freezing wind, tears streaming from eyes tinted blue by contacts. They were the grinning, lying masks of Paul Laurence Dunbar's verse—Black expression painfully conforming to oppressive standards—but transposed to a key of triumphant appropriation.

Midway through this alpine fantasia, I noticed a young Black woman in the audience with a pajama-clad daughter in her lap. Onscreen, two women conjoined by intricately fused plaits played patty-cake amid the fjords and mountains. Cool Norwegian light bathed the child's face like underpainting as she watched the scene with complete absorption. She reached up and tugged her mother's braid. ♦

By Vince Aletti

By Hilton Als

By Andrea K. Scott

By Adam Gopnik

Shouts & Murmurs

- **And the Lord Said, “You’ve Got a Time-Out, Mister”**

By [Simon Rich]

And so the Lord created two humans in His image, called Adam and Eve. And He put them in the Garden of Eden and provided them with everything that they could want. And all He asked in return was that they not eat from the Tree of Knowledge. But, lo, it came to pass that they did eat from this tree. And when the Lord saw that they had disobeyed Him, He was filled with wrath. And so He said to Eve, “Because you have done this, I will make your labor pains severe, and you will suffer greatly during childbirth.” And to Adam He said, “From this day forth, you will work by the sweat of your brow in the fields, and indeed you shall die there, for you are made of dust, and to dust you shall return.” And He banished Adam and Eve and brought forth His Angel to guard the Garden with a flaming, whirring sword for all eternity.

And when Adam and Eve were out of earshot, the Lord turned to His Angel and said, “Was that too harsh?”

And the Angel stared back at Him and said, “Uh, yeah, probably. They ate one piece of fruit.”

And the Lord groaned and said, “Why didn’t you stop me?”

And the Angel said, “We’re supposed to be a united front. If we contradict each other, it’ll just make them confused.” And she shook her head and said, “What was with that ‘dust’ thing?”

And the Lord sighed and said, “I don’t know. I knew it was crazy even while I was saying it, but I couldn’t stop myself. It was just, like, out of nowhere I heard my dad’s voice coming out of my mouth.”

And the Angel said, “Well, I guess we should go talk to them.”

And the Lord said, “What do you mean?”

And the Angel said, “You know, to tell them we changed our mind about the punishment.”

And the Lord said, “No, we’ve got to follow through. Otherwise, they’ll never take anything we say seriously again!” And He handed her the sword and set it on fire and told her to start whirring it.

And the Angel said, “I really don’t think we’re going about this right.”

And the Lord said, “Just let me handle the discipline, O.K.? I know what I’m doing.”

And so the Lord stuck to the banishment thing. But, despite the harsh punishment, the humans continued to sin. And one day the Angel showed the Lord a note from school, and He was, like, “Fuck, this is some major shit.”

And the Angel said, “Yeah, they’re starting to have real behavioral problems. We should talk to a psychologist and get some advice on what to do.”

And the Lord said, “There’s only one thing we *can* do: bring the hammer down.”

And the Angel said, “What? Why?”

And the Lord said, “Because we set a precedent with that fucking fruit thing! If we don’t punish them at least that much for this new stuff, they’re going to think that sodomy and murder aren’t as bad as, like, sharing a bite of an apple.”

And the Angel said, “I’ve actually been reading a lot about this lately, and most experts agree that punishments are counterproductive.”

And the Lord said, “So, what, we’re just supposed to let them do whatever they want and become drug addicts?”

And the Angel rolled her eyes and said, “I’m obviously not saying that I want them to become drug addicts.” And then she added, softly, “This is why we should’ve signed up for that class.”

And the Lord said, “That class was bullshit!”

And the Angel said, “How would you know? You refused to even read the description on the Web site.”

And the Lord said, “It was held in the basement of a toy store! It was obviously just a scam to sell us toys!”

And that was how the conversation ended, without any resolution about the whole discipline thing.

And so the Lord punished the humans more and more, with floods and plagues and entire centuries without any television, and He kept giving them new rules, some of which made sense, but some of which were arbitrary, like “Don’t mix milk and meat,” which was something He’d just blurted out one morning when He was half asleep but now felt obliged to stick to. And it got to the point where He could barely even keep track of the rules that He had made, or what the penalties were for breaking them. And so the humans were punished inconsistently, in ways that had more to do with His frustration level than with any kind of actual philosophy or game plan. Like, sometimes the humans would have punishments heaped upon them for basically no reason, and sometimes they’d do something truly messed up and get no punishment at all, or even be rewarded with political office.

And the Angel would say, “What happened to being consistent?”

And the Lord would tell her some bullshit about how it was a Test, but really it was just that He was overwhelmed and exhausted and also privately kind of stressed out about money.

And so it came to pass that there was basically zero continuity. And one day, in desperation, the Lord suggested that they pick the ten main rules and engrave them on a pair of stone tablets.

And the Angel said, “A, they’re never going to follow that, and, B, it’s completely unenforceable. Like, the only way to police it would be to watch them around the clock, which would be more of a punishment for us than for them.”

And the Lord broke down and admitted that the Angel was right, and that the tablet thing was crazy, and that He'd only suggested it because He was so beat down and broken and stressed out about money that He didn't know what the fuck to do anymore about anything.

And the Angel said, "What is going on with you? You can tell me."

And the Lord took a deep breath and confessed His secret fear: "I feel like the humans are becoming bad people, and it's all because of me."

And the Angel took His hand and said, "That isn't true."

And the Lord looked hopeful and said, "So you think the humans are turning out all right?"

And the Angel said, "No. They obviously have some real issues. But I don't think it's all because of you."

And the Lord said, "Everything's all because of me. I'm omnipotent."

And the Angel said, "I think maybe, when it comes to creating humans, no one is. Sure, you can guide them a little here and there, and, obviously, it's possible to really fuck them up, like, that's been proven with those Romanian-orphanage studies. But in general you can't control what kind of people they become. No matter what you do, they just end up turning into . . . themselves."

And, as her point was sinking in, the Lord looked down and saw that the humans had started a new war. And He was going to do what He normally did (punish all involved, whether they'd started it or not), but instead He turned to the Angel and said, "Maybe we should go out tonight?"

And the Angel said, "What about the flaming sword?" Because she'd been whirring it around this whole time.

And the Lord was, like, "I'm sorry I made you do that. You can put it down. That was just me being nuts."

And so they dressed up and went out for the first time in eternity. And they ordered drinks and appetizers and the whole thing. And they talked about fun subjects that they couldn't discuss when the humans were around, like whether or not Heaven was real, and how the secret numerical code in the Bible really worked. And they had so much fun that it felt like they were back In The Beginning, before they had humans, or even any animals, and it was just the two of them floating around among the sun and moon and stars.

And it came to pass that spending some time away from the humans made them feel better about them. And the Lord quoted some of the cute things He'd overheard them saying lately, like "I have a plan for my future" and "Here is the forecast for tomorrow's weather." And the Angel showed the Lord photos of some of the cute crap that the humans had made recently, like forts and towers and cities, and even though the Lord knew that it was going to be a pain in the ass to clean it all up, and that the humans would probably cry when He knocked it all down, He had to admit that it was adorable.

And they stayed out so late that they lost track of time, and their babysitter, Satan, texted them saying the next hour would be forty dollars, because after 10 *p.m.* counted as overtime.

And the Lord said, "Maybe we should find a different sitter."

And the Angel said, "There's no one else. I've checked."

And the Lord told her how grateful He was that they were doing this crazy thing together, because, even though it was a shit show, there was no one in the universe He'd rather create humans with.

And the Angel smiled and said, "Do you ever think about creating more?"

And the Lord said, "No fucking way. I mean, where would we even put them?"

And the Angel shrugged and said, "We could add another continent, or, if that's too expensive, put up drywall."

And the Lord laughed and said, “You’re nuts! If we add more humans, we’ll never have a handle on things.”

And the Angel said, “Yeah, but maybe *they* will.”

And the Lord was taken aback, because He’d never considered that possibility, that someday the humans would know things that He didn’t, fix problems that He couldn’t, make new things that He wouldn’t. He’d been trying to mold them in His image, but maybe they never would be. Maybe, instead, they’d be better. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

Tables for Two

- **Food Is Art at Koloman**

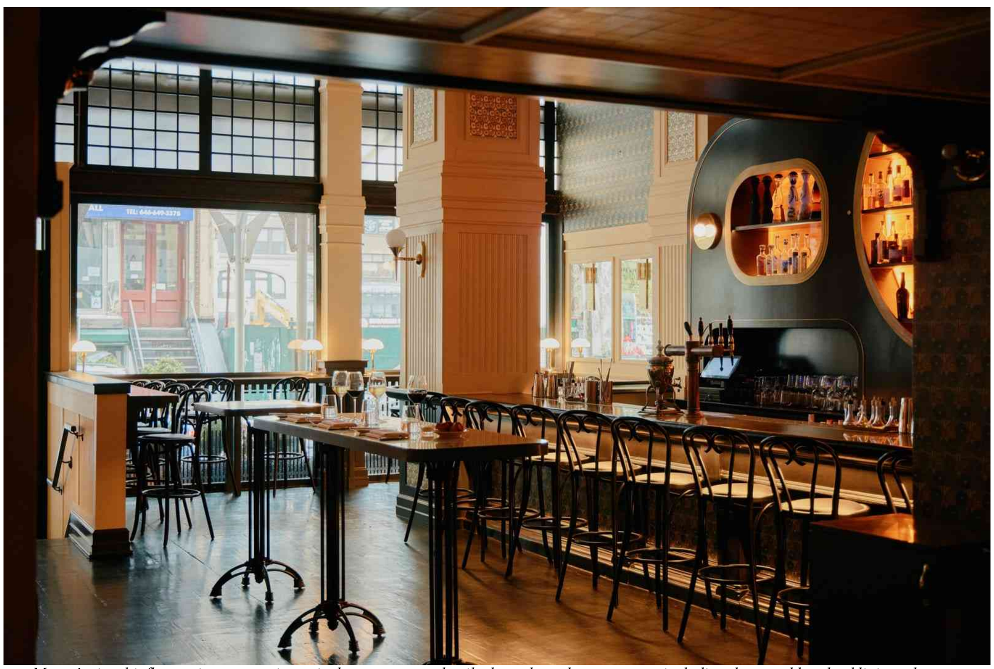
By Shauna Lyon

Markus Glocker, the chef and co-owner of Koloman—a new French-Viennese restaurant in the former Breslin space, adjoining the Ace Hotel in NoMad—has a clarity of vision that springs from the philosophy of the turn-of-the-century artist Koloman Moser. It may sound a bit stiff, such a specific and obscure restaurant theme—Koloman who?—but Glocker shares a kindred spirit with the graphic designer and painter, a founding member of the Viennese Secession movement, whose concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total art, included furniture, textiles, metalwork, stained glass, and other crafts. Glocker takes this idea to its logical modern-day conclusion, extending total art to also encompass—what else?—food.

Glocker grew up in a small town in Austria, where he was expected to take over his family's hotel, but, he told me, after culinary school, "I packed my bags and left," to cook with Gordon Ramsay, in London and New York, and Charlie Trotter, in Chicago, where he discovered that he loved discipline in the kitchen. That discipline was on full display during his seven years as the chef and co-owner of Bâtard, in Tribeca, where he was showered with accolades for the restaurant's genial fine dining at a technical epitome. When Bâtard closed during the pandemic for the second time, in 2021, and the Breslin space became available, Glocker—who'd "had a business plan in my pocket for quite a while"—took the plunge on his dream project.

Koloman Moser's visual influence is apparent in meticulous, gorgeous details throughout the restaurant, such as brass light fixtures re-created from Moser's designs, and the grand bar, backlit in amber and anchored by a train-station-worthy brass-and-mica clock—but the food is all Glocker. The tight menu features coyly engaging twists on classic French and Viennese cuisine. Duck-liver parfait is topped with a gelée of Kracher, Austria's rival to France's Sauternes. The beets in the Roasted Beets "Linzer" taste nearly candied, their sweetness from raspberry vinegar; they're tossed with little squares of shortbread. ("Didn't look like a Linzer torte, but it tasted like it," a friend proclaimed.) Oversized gougères (no complaints here) incorporate *Bergkäse*, Pleasant Ridge Reserve, and Cheddar cheese and red-wine-braised shallots into *pâte à choux* dough; they're baked in muffin tins, yielding maximum caramelized crust and a gooey center.

Glocker’s Short Rib & Tafelspitz Terrine was born from a reverie of Sunday meals after church. “My father took me to the local restaurant, and we had boiled beef”—Tafelspitz, named for the cut of meat used, essentially tri-tip. “The leftovers we took home. He had it in the fridge, it just kind of jellified, and then he took it out, sliced it, put a little bit of vinaigrette over the top, a piece of bread. That was it. It was delicious.” For Glocker’s terrine, he cooks beef shoulder, chuck, and top round, chills them in their broth, and slices the result for layers of the terrine, which gets wrapped in carrots cooked in the same broth. It’s served chilled, finished with Styrian pumpkin-seed oil, a high-end cold-pressed specialty of Styria, Austria; egg yolk and tarragon cream take the edge off the austerity of the meat.



Koloman Moser’s visual influence is apparent in meticulous, gorgeous details throughout the restaurant, including the grand bar, backlit in amber.

A perfectly crisp schnitzel starts with a veal loin—more tender than the usual top round—which gets shallow-fried in clarified butter. Its bevy of accompaniments includes lingonberry and sea-buckthorn sauces, to cut the richness with sweet-and-sour tang; and a lively potato salad—“You have to leave it out,” Glocker said, “as soon as you put potato salad in the fridge the flavor’s gone”—made the way his mom did, properly seasoned with vinegar.

There are other standouts—beef tenderloin with a bone-marrow-and-brioche crust, served with marvellous *Baumkuchen*, potato-pancake rings filled with potato purée; hefty cross-sections of salmon sandwiched in a cracklingly

crisp tramezzini-bread croûte. For one last surprise, try the crème brûlée. You’d never guess it, but Glocker has discovered that duck egg transforms custard into a cloudlike ideal. (Dishes $15-$60.) ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

The Art World

- **John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres's Portraits of the South Bronx**

John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres's Portraits of the South Bronx

"Swagger and Tenderness," at the Bronx Museum, brings back the beauty of a struggling community.

By Hilton Als



Part of what makes John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres's show "Swagger and Tenderness: The South Bronx Portraits" (at the Bronx Museum) so remarkable is that it reminds you of two things that made New York City, predevelopment, so remarkable: chance and faith. Back in 1961, Jane Jacobs, in her prescient study "The Death and Life of Great American Cities," argued that urban planning—highways, high-rises, and malls—came at a terrible price. By obliterating communities, you obliterated all that they fostered: the happy accidents and impromptu encounters that could lead to an exchange of ideas that might expand your understanding of both the individual and the community as a whole. Ahearn, who makes plaster-cast sculptures of Black and Hispanic people he has known and admired in the four decades that he's worked in the South Bronx, captures some of what Jacobs celebrated: the intelligence that goes into not only surviving the streets but making them feel like home. For Ahearn, God is in the people.

Born in Binghamton, New York, in 1951, Ahearn grew up in a middle-class neighborhood, the child of a conservative doctor. As an undergraduate at Cornell University, he discovered art and art-making, and soon he was producing a painting a day, hitchhiking around Ithaca, no matter the weather, and setting up his easel wherever he was dropped off. After graduating, he settled in downtown Manhattan. At the time, the artists who were represented by the powerful galleries and had a strong market—people such as Sandro Chia and Neil Jenney—produced primarily figurative work. Ahearn was turned off by that scene, and he joined Colab, a radical artists' collective that responded to the politics of the time by making work that was rude, rough, and confrontational. Painting in plein air was out; graffiti was in. Documentary footage in "Swagger and Tenderness" (just one of many touching elements in the exhibition) shows a young Ahearn on a Bronx sidewalk—filmed by his twin brother, Charlie, who directed the seminal 1983 hip-hop picture "Wild Style"—learning and perfecting his signature visual style as he understood what kind of artist he meant to be: a recorder of his time, alive to the moment.

In 1980, Colab produced one of the greatest exhibitions I have ever seen: "The Times Square Show." Mounted in a shuttered massage parlor on West Forty-first Street, at a time when it was hard to find an area of New York that *wasn't* filthy, the show included film, fashion designs, paintings, sculpture, flyers, graffiti, and other forms, all the works encountering one another, speaking to one another, in the way that people—friends—did on the city streets: heedful of the now, trusting the rightness of chance. What made "The Times Square Show" so exhilarating was, among other things, its refusal to follow the museum and gallery formula. There were no wall labels, no neat divisions between genres and time periods. The show happened resolutely in the now—in an era when you could go out to pick up the newspaper, say, at Gem Spa, in the East Village, and run into friends who were enthusing about a John Sex performance or the latest issue of *Just Another Asshole*, and that conversation would lead to word of a show in another part of town and you wouldn't get home until two or three in the morning, but what was wrong with that? Every event was a natural progression of the day itself; culture was an open field, and the best, most illuminating aspects of it weren't defined or validated by commerce.

Among the works I recall seeing at "The Times Square Show" were sculptures by John Ahearn. The pieces were lifelike depictions of faces, with partial torsos executed in plaster, then painted in beautiful colors: browns and blacks and golds. They were vivid and alive, those heads, like icons in a church devoted to a new kind of Jesus, hip and sporting ecclesiastical jeans. Looking up at them, you felt their presence so strongly that it was as if the subjects were speaking to you, like neighbors on your stoop telling the story of us.

I didn't know anything about Ahearn then. But, as I later learned, he'd had no experience with plaster casting until 1979, when he was spending time at Fashion Moda, an experimental community art space in the South Bronx. He was inspired to make sculptural work in part by a friend who repaired old castings and statues for the Museum of Natural History, and in part by a book he read called "Makeup for Theater, Film and Television." Ahearn's first sitters were recovering drug addicts who visited a methadone clinic across the street from Fashion Moda and a few hookers from the area. Like his artistic predecessor Alice Neel, Ahearn wasn't comfortable within the precincts of self-conscious downtown bohemia, no matter how rad. So, in 1980, with the support of his new friend and collaborator Rigoberto Torres, who had made plaster casts at his uncle's statuary shop—the Virgin Mary, Elvis, that kind of thing—Ahearn decided to move to the South Bronx. He got an apartment on Walton Avenue, where, as he has said, he felt like "a real person." You know your authentic self when you find it, no matter what your race may be.

The late nineteen-seventies and the early eighties were a particularly terrible time for the South Bronx. Crack. Gangs and shootings. Racism. Poor health care. Worse housing. (The area was so notorious that a 1981 movie set there was titled "Fort Apache, the Bronx.") But, like anywhere under siege, the neighborhood was also a real community—families, lovers, and friends who stuck together because they were all they had and all they had to hope for.

As Ahearn explored his new form, Torres became a creative partner, and an essential one. Torres, who lived on Walton Avenue, too, was a local and Ahearn wasn't. Working together, the sculptors had a better chance of getting the people in the neighborhood to trust them enough to sit for them and be depicted in the work—work that spoke to and about Ahearn's interest

in their lives, at a time when there was scant evidence that anyone outside the Bronx was interested at all.

In "Swagger and Tenderness," the conscientious co-curators, Amy Rosenblum-Martín and Ron Kavanaugh, have tried as much as possible to bring that era back—the time when Ahearn was first embarking on the project and when Torres was discovering his own skills as a creator. But you can never go back, and that's part of what gives the show its beauty, its heft, its melancholic tenderness. Who can know another person? So many people frozen in time, so many stories that went on after the captured moment. The artifacts in the vitrines that greet you at the Bronx Museum—a pair of jelly sandals, which were especially popular in the early eighties; the kind of nice lace doily you might have seen in someone's mother's house back then—are reminders of a time past. Walking through the show is like strolling through a retrospective of the streets you used to know, a New York that was sprawling and electric with possibility, filled with faces and bodies that the art world either treated as a cause or was entirely oblivious of, because it could be. (In a wonderful section of the museum, you can see Torres, in a hitherto unreleased film by Charlie Ahearn, making his 1985 sculpture "Shorty Working at the C & R Statuary Corp." The piece is a sort of refracted self-portrait, given that Torres did similar work for his uncle before meeting Ahearn.)

Some of the museum's walls have been painted a deep cobalt blue so that the mounted sculptures would stand out, and they do. (There are a number of dramatic freestanding pieces as well.) Ahearn is a great colorist, and although the skin tones of his subjects are true to life, they're also the product of his hyperrealist brush, and of his fascination with what makes a body, what makes a face, and what goes into self-representation. You can't look at an early work like "Luis and Virginia Arroyo" (1980), which shows a husband and wife in a warm embrace, and not see how much of themselves the subjects gave to the project and how much Ahearn wanted to repay that trust—a spiritual exchange that amounts to an object lesson in faith.

The current argument about seeing or not seeing oneself represented in art or film—"multiculturalism," it was called back then—was just becoming central to the Western discourse on beauty and aesthetics. To Ahearn and Torres, *all* their subjects were more than worthy objects of attention, and

they didn’t need to be told so by any theorist, especially one who didn’t even know where the South Bronx was. The artists thrive on the power of their subjects—their pride, wit, vulnerability, determination, and individuality. Exuberance or enthusiasm unmasked by art-world fashions, such as Pop or Neo-Impressionism, tends to be taken less seriously than it should be, and Ahearn and Torres have, to some degree, been marginalized by the art world, but they haven’t been ignored. In 1992, Jane Kramer published an extraordinary piece on Ahearn in this magazine, “Whose Art Is It?,” in which she cited all the predictable criticisms that had been levelled at the artist: What right did a white man have to live among—let alone make work about—people who were different from him? Was he exploiting Torres and all those South Bronx neighbors for his personal gain? The arguments will persist, but will always be trumped by what the artists have done here, an achievement not unlike that of the legendary white Catholic activist Dorothy Day, who chose to live among the poor and despised because she, like Ahearn, had broken her ties with the version of whiteness that could see and acknowledge nothing but itself. ♦

By Françoise Mouly

By Colin Stokes

By Eli Grober

By Rachel Riederer

The Current Cinema

- Damien Chazelle's "Babylon" Goes Nowhere, in a Mad Rush

By Anthony Lane

How much is too much? Try "Babylon," the latest film from Damien Chazelle. Within five minutes, we realize that excess is in the air—and, indeed, all over the camera lens, in the form of elephant dung. The ensuing half hour, an excursion into the orgiastic, brings us a woman peeing onto the bloated belly of a partygoer, alpine hills of cocaine, and a dwarf using a giant phallus as a pogo stick. Still to come: a movie producer walking around in the desert, at night, with his head stuck in a toilet seat, and, by way of a bonne bouche, toward the end of the feast, a guy who consumes live rats. Happy now?

This is a film about films and filming. It would swallow itself if it could. Much of the saga, which kicks off in 1926, is set in Hollywood, and in the blast area that surrounds it. Our guide to the festivities is Manny (Diego Calva), who rises from the rank of lowly fixer to that of studio executive, yet never achieves the solidity of a main character. At the initial soirée, he falls for a gadabout named Nellie LaRoy (Margot Robbie), who can't park a car without crashing into a statue, and who caps off her evening with a crowd surf. She, too, will reach undreamed-of heights. Tellingly, both she and Manny begin their ascent on the day after the debauch; he becomes a personal assistant to an affable superstar, Jack Conrad (Brad Pitt), while Nellie, at short notice, gets the opportunity to flaunt her acting skills. This she does with gusto—hoofing, grinning, and turning her tears on and off like a plumber fixing a faucet.

The mission of "Babylon" is to laud the last hurrah of silent cinema. (Nothing lands with a more predictable clunk than the sequence in which Manny goes to New York to catch the première of "The Jazz Singer," in 1927, rushes to a pay phone, and exclaims to Jack, back in Los Angeles, "Everything is going to change.") Cinéastes can have fun tracing the roots of Chazelle's fictional figures. Jack has a dash of John Gilbert, whose smolderings with Greta Garbo, in "Flesh and the Devil," were a real-life highlight of 1926. Anna May Wong, the leading Asian American idol of the period, is the obvious model for Lady Fay Zhu (Li Jun Li), though Fay's very public smooching of a woman is more of a nod to Marlene Dietrich, in "Morocco" (1930). As for Nellie, the unblushing gall with which she steals a scene from another actress is pure Clara Bow—who, like Nellie, had a

mother in a sanitarium. Then, there's Irving Thalberg (Max Minghella). I can't prove anything, but I reckon that he's based on Irving Thalberg.

The strange thing is that, after more than three hours, "Babylon" doesn't leave you any the wiser, in regard to pre-talkies Hollywood, than you were at the outset. One lesson of "The Parade's Gone By," Kevin Brownlow's engrossing study of the era, is that the movie industry was, above all, industrious, learning fast from trial and error; the toil that we witness in "Babylon," on the other hand, consists of jinks, japes, and flaming meltdowns. The film sets seem to be run by the Keystone Cops, and Chazelle strains every muscle—in the editing, as in the scurries of the camera—to stop the fever breaking. Emma Stone, in Chazelle's "La La Land" (2016), was granted a beautiful lull in which to deliver her saddest song, but Margot Robbie has no such chance to breathe. Her performance isn't over the top, but her character, as conceived and written, most definitely is, and she has no option but to follow suit. Such is "Babylon." It goes nowhere, in a mad rush.

And so to the grand finale. When and where it occurs I won't reveal. Suffice to say that it includes a splash of "Singin' in the Rain" (1952)—generous but also ill-advised, since it merely triggers an instant desire for less "Babylon" and more Gene Kelly. Undaunted, Chazelle then offers a frenzied scrapbook of the medium's greatest hits, with bits of Bergman, Kubrick, Godard, and God knows what all pasted together. The implication is that Jack, Nellie, Fay, and the gang, delirious and doomed as they were, did not strive in vain, and that from their efforts bloomed the glory of cinema, to which "Babylon" is a crowning valediction. In the brave words of Jack Conrad, "What I do *means* something." If you say so, Jack.

For some reason, we're in the middle of a Sissi fit. The life of Elisabeth, Empress of Austria and Queen of Hungary, often known as Sissi, or Sisi, has never lacked for commemoration. Ever since she was killed by an Italian anarchist, in 1898, she has acquired a patina of myth. The first movie about her was released in 1921, and a three-part bio-pic, starring Romy Schneider, and commencing with "Sissi," in 1955, has proved so abidingly popular that German and Austrian families still watch it at Christmas, on TV. Recently, interest has welled up afresh. Netflix paid tribute with "The Empress," a second series of which is in the works. Now we have "Corsage," a new film

directed by Marie Kreutzer, which doesn't so much embrace the Sissi legend as squeeze it tight and wait for it to howl.

The Empress, in "Corsage," is played by Vicky Krieps. The tough intelligence that she brought to "Phantom Thread" (2017) is deployed again here, armored with amusement: a vital shield, given that Elisabeth, according to this telling of the tale, needed all the armor she could get. Of her youth, and the early years of her marriage to Emperor Franz Joseph (Florian Teichtmeister)—the wedding took place in 1854, when she was sixteen—the film shows us nothing, but, from the start, we find a woman enchained. Sissi is turning forty (the age, she says, at which "a person begins to disperse and fade"), and she first appears under water, holding her breath in the bath, to see how long she can last without air. Next comes a closeup of her waist, being laced with pitiless pressure, at her own behest, into a corset. Ah, so *that's* what the title means.

The driving purpose of these images is not hard to discern. What Kreutzer aims to impress upon us is the effect of smothering and constraint—not only upon her heroine but also upon the female sex, at every social stratum, under Habsburg rule. When Her Imperial Highness tours a Viennese asylum for those of unsound mind, she graciously brings little boxes of candied violets, yet her expression suggests a keener sympathy. One woman is strapped to a bed inside a netted cage; another is bound like a mummy. "She looks as though she wants to weep but can't," Elisabeth says. Of a shuddering inmate she asks, "What's wrong with her?" A doctor replies, "Adultery, Your Majesty."

If Elisabeth does not contract that infectious condition, it is not for lack of trying. In England, she seeks out Bay (Colin Morgan), her riding instructor. "I love to look at you looking at me," she tells him, assuming command of the male gaze. In Bavaria, she swims naked with her cousin Ludwig II (Manuel Rubey), and permits him to pour melted chocolate into her open mouth, but that is the limit of their intimacy. The film is a catalogue of her lunges at liberation; at the risk of heresy, I found myself growing more interested in the stiff souls who accompany the Empress, torn between their devotion to her and annoyance at her calculated whims. None are stiffer than her solemn young daughter Valerie (Rosa Hajjaj), who views her mother, correctly, as more childish than she herself.

The movie's means of approach is the punky-historical—a stance familiar to fans of "Marie Antoinette" (2006) and "The Favourite" (2018). The trick is to marry detailed reconstruction with impudent anachronism, to prevent us from settling into a costume drama as if it were a comfortable couch. Thus, after fainting (or pretending to faint) at a ceremony, the Empress climbs a staircase, in slow motion, and stares directly at us; exiting a dinner, she gives the finger to the remaining guests; and, seated outside her summer residence, she is serenaded by a harpist who warbles the Rolling Stones' "As Tears Go By." The sharpest jolt is provided by Louis Le Prince (Finnegan Oldfield), who meets Elisabeth in 1878 and says, "I would like to film you." She is baffled by the verb, but he captures her running, jumping, and soundlessly screaming on his new-fangled device.

This is nonsense. The earliest surviving footage shot by Le Prince—by anyone in the world, some would argue—dates from 1888. Does it matter that Kreutzer gets the fangling wrong by ten years? Or that she alters the circumstances of Elisabeth's death entirely, making them less bizarre than they were? Not really. Not if you adhere to the principle that established facts are a check on the imagination, and that the only possible function of formality, whether in governance, conduct, or dress, is to stunt the free play of feelings. No one can quarrel with the smart and forthright style in which "Corsage" espouses that creed. It's worth asking, though, if there isn't something *easy* in the automatic ridicule of manners past. Just as we look back and smile at the sugary confection of "Sissi," this movie, too, might yet come to be seen as a twisted curiosity of its time. ♦

By Richard Brody

By Michael Schulman

By Richard Brody

By Richard Brody

The Theatre

- **Denis Johnson and Stephen Adly Guirgis’s Drinking Games**

Denis Johnson and Stephen Adly Guirgis's Drinking Games

Both Johnson's "Des Moines" and Guirgis's "Between Riverside and Crazy" feature alcohol as a spur and a conduit to otherwise fugitive knowledge.

By Vinson Cunningham



You always learn something new when you watch somebody drink. Not that vino leads to veritas in any literal way—but, over the span of a long, soggy night, small, revealing details, often more gestural than verbal, accumulate. How your fellow-partygoer holds a glass, or how often she takes a drink, or what counts, in her world, as a cocktail: all of this helps you to know her better, to figure out where she's really coming from. Two recent productions—"Des Moines," the final play by the late Denis Johnson, from 2007, and a revival of Stephen Adly Guirgis's Pulitzer-winning "Between Riverside and Crazy," from 2014, in its Broadway première—feature alcohol as a spur and a guiding presence, a conduit to otherwise fugitive knowledge.

The central event of "Des Moines"—directed by Arin Arbus, for Theatre for a New Audience, at the Polonsky Shakespeare Center—is an impromptu gathering that quickly becomes a drink-fuelled bacchanal. Dan (Arliss

Howard) and Marta (Johanna Day) are an aging couple further aged by sorrows that they find hard to articulate, and by a stubborn but unspoken ambivalence about the substance and meaning of their lives. At the beginning of the play, whose main setting is their kitchen, they're talking past each other in a way that makes their anomie plain. Dan, a cabdriver, has recently come into contact with Mrs. Drinkwater (Heather Alicia Simms), whose husband died in a plane crash. Dan's cab was the last car the poor guy ever rode in. As he tries to relate this story to Marta, she's more worried about whether he plans to eat a full meal. "So is this new diet some sort of spiritual thing?" she asks. "Because I made spaghetti. Is this a spiritual pilgrimage you're on, Dan, with the cereal?"

That's a funny question, but as the play wears on it seems like the key to something. Here, as elsewhere in Johnson's œuvre—his short-story collection "Jesus' Son" being the prime example—the characters are desperately sad and live lives that feel almost willfully marginal, but their psyches are shot through with deep and often numinous yearnings. Dan goes to confession, spilling his beans to a priest he doesn't totally respect. Marta hates when Dan curses and is always inviting over that priest, Father Michael (Michael Shannon, in a first-name coincidence that, in this case, feels fated). This pocket of Iowa is full of Polish Catholics. "We're as Polish as sausage and—something else that's Polish," Father Michael says. From the outside, Dan and Marta might seem like simple people, but they're both reaching for some kind of unseeable light.

The plain kitchen shows signs of working-class wear. Their most used cooking instruments seem to be the hissing coffee maker and the microwave where Marta heats up the much discussed spaghetti. In an oddly thrilling sight gag, the couple stop talking for a whole minute and watch the glowing microwave while the food warms up—that's one way, plate by plate, to watch your whole life zapping past you.

Some of the mysterious mismatch at work in "Des Moines"—between outer affect and inner striving, between surfaces and soul—is expressed by way of its setting. We never leave Dan and Marta's apartment, but we get a sense of how they've been created, and are now constrained, by their wider surroundings. When Father Michael comes over, he keeps marvelling at how much the area's changed. "I hardly recognized the old neighborhood," he

says more than once. His musings about the built environment send him inward:

> Now we call it a street. It used to be a road. I think I can remember when it wasn't even paved. In my mind I have this very vague image of a dirt road. I'd have been very very young then. . . . Sometimes the horror of my youth is so vivid—so near, so accessible, that I feel as if I just got plucked from it one minute ago and rescued miraculously to here, to this point in my life. I have nooooo desire to be young again.

Marta is religious, yes, but she never makes it to Mass: she doesn't remember the last time she left the neighborhood. Instead, she watches "Mass for Shut-ins" on TV. In his youth, Dan entered the military, hoping to travel. Instead, he got stationed at Fort Des Moines, stuck right back where he started. "Less than seven blocks from the hospital I was born in," he says. "I used to go over there to the hospital I was born in and eat in the cafeteria sometimes."

These people need a catharsis, and quickly. The whole play, for better and for worse, feels like an excuse to get them drinking together. Parties create pairings. Father Michael, who likes to put on makeup and go to gay bars at night, has a strong, strange kinship with Dan and Marta's granddaughter, Jimmy (a slyly Dionysian Hari Nef, who knows how to have—and to goad on—a good time onstage). Jimmy has recently had a botched sex-reassignment surgery that has left her in a wheelchair. "My tailbone never woke up," she says. "I'm sure it's having a beautiful dream." Michael and Jimmy get Mrs. Drinkwater, the widow, downing what they call "depth chargers"—shots of whiskey plopped into glasses of beer, the perilous concoction chugged whole.

The play gives way to the loose, dreamlike, only notionally sequential structure of a sloppy night in. Several turns of karaoke are taken—lengthy renditions no less intense than the microwave moment—a beer bottle smashed, sadnesses shared. It's especially interesting to watch Mrs. Drinkwater, the only Black person in the show, open up and drop her guard. (It's funny, too, that her name bespeaks a Puritan restraint nowhere on offer during this fortuitous night.) Simms has a patient physicality that helps her play at shyness while slowly, then suddenly, revealing a streak of mischief.

Marta and Dan are sort of obsessed by Mrs. Drinkwater's race—"The black widow is a whore!" Marta says—and you can see the toll that a lifetime under the spotlight of race has taken on her.

Perhaps that's why one of the great moments of the show is nonverbal. Mrs. Drinkwater peels off her outer coat to reveal her modest but formfitting blue dress. She's proudly drunk, ready to sing, and willing herself in the direction of a good time.

Walter Washington (Stephen McKinley Henderson, characteristically great), the operatically flawed hero of Stephen Adly Guirgis's "Between Riverside and Crazy," is a through and through drunk. He drinks whiskey out of a china teacup at breakfast, alongside a slice of pie, and lets the logic of the bottle slide through the rest of his day, coloring his tangy jokes and harsh language. After dinner, and just before a titanic confrontation, he offers a guest a cup of coffee spiked with Cognac. Everybody around him knows that, despite the constant drink and the barbs in his conversation, he's a softie, even quite emotional, at heart.

Walter lives in an old, formerly grand apartment on Riverside Drive with his son, Junior (Common), Junior's friend Oswaldo (Victor Almanzar), and Junior's skimpily dressed girlfriend, Lulu (the fantastic Rosal Colón). They've all had bad brushes with the law, and all of them call Walter "Pops," or "Dad." Walter's in the middle of a long-running feud with the N.Y.P.D., where he used to work as a cop, until he was shot by a white officer. As the force—in the person of his former partner, Detective Audrey O'Connor (Elizabeth Canavan), and her fiancé, Lieutenant Dave Caro (Michael Rispoli)—doubles down on its effort to get him to settle his lawsuit against the city, Walter, in a sequence of tough conversations, paints a portrait of himself as a hard, stubborn, all but unmovable motherfucker.

Guirgis's writing and pacing are, as ever, hilariously quick and spot-on. Austin Pendleton directs the actors with the accuracy of a hectic but precise dance. The most heartening thing about this whirlingly accomplished character study is the self-knowledge of its main character. "Do I like myself? Hell no!" Walter says at the outset of one of his tirades. "Do I drink? Hell yes!" ♦

By Helen Shaw

By Michael Schulman

By Cal Newport

By Katy Waldman

The Wayward Press

- **A Media Mogul Pivots to Paper**

A Media Mogul Pivots to Paper

The Whitney Museum once accidentally threw out a newspaper box that Mitch Anzuoni had stocked with books, zines, and erotica. Now he has a citywide network of them.

By Adam Iscoe



In the old days—the days of the sidewalk shoeshine, the days of the pay phone—a New Yorker could buy an evening edition of the *Times* or the *Post* from a metal news box and read it on the subway home. No push notifications involved. But history has a way of repeating itself. Somehow, baggy jeans are back, and mullets, too. And news boxes are showing up on street corners again. A few years ago, Mitch Anzuoni, a self-proclaimed multimedia mogul who runs a small press called Inpatient, started placing old newspaper boxes around town. Inside: posters, books, zines, erotica. Cost: a quarter. “I publish anything!” Anzuoni said the other day, on the sidewalk near his office, in Boerum Hill. “Newspapers, underground newspapers, stuff I find on the Internet.” He read from one of the offerings, “a book of mind-control patents that are really crazy!”: “This invention pertains to influencing the nervous system of a subject by a weak externally applied magnetic field with a frequency near 1/2 hz.”

Anzuoni, who wore dirty white sneakers and carried a waterproof backpack ("I work in books, man! Water is the enemy!"), was loading a recently acquired news box into the back of his girlfriend's Lexus S.U.V. "*This* is the Inpatient Express," he said, of the car. He pointed to the news box, which he had bought on eBay, for two hundred and fifty dollars. "Here is the new guy, a beautiful Facebook blue. I drove out to New Jersey to get it."

Coco Fitterman, a twenty-four-year-old master's student in comparative literature at *CUNY*, who works as Anzuoni's "executive-intern-in-chief," was helping out. "It's so heavy!" she said, hoisting the box into the trunk, which also held L. L. Bean snowshoes. "I don't know how I thought we were going to take this on the train!"

Anzuoni, who is thirty-two, planned to spend the afternoon checking on his news boxes before installing the latest one. Inpatient's titles, which are printed and bound in Reykjavík, Iceland, include a novel, translated from the Russian, that is rumored to be authored by Vladimir Putin's former deputy chief of staff; a story about the sex life of a grocery-store cashier; and a young woman's (that is, Fitterman's) first chapbook. "I realized I can make any book I want," Anzuoni said. "Our motto is 'We Publish What Others Don't.' " His stock is sold at bookstores in Paris, Mexico City, Hong Kong, Berlin, Brussels. In New York, McNally Jackson, Printed Matter, and, occasionally, the store at the Whitney Museum carry Inpatient titles, but Anzuoni prefers less conventional distribution. He used to sell books out of special pockets sewn inside a trenchcoat: "I'd just go up to people who looked bored. 'Hey, want to buy a book?' "

The news-box project had a tumultuous beginning. In 2019, Anzuoni dropped off his first box, painted taxicab yellow, outside the Whitney, with the blessing of the city's Department of Transportation. A week later, he walked by and saw that it was gone. He asked a museum security guard if he knew what had happened. The guy didn't, but he promised to review security-camera footage of the scene. The next day, the Whitney's head of security called with news that an employee had accidentally moved the news box to the loading dock. "It turns out we treated it as lost property," the guard said. "It got picked up and taken to a junk yard in Red Hook and destroyed."

Anzuoni was devastated. He demanded an apology. The Whitney sent him one, on official letterhead, and a check for $477.56—what he had paid for the news box. (A friend interning at the museum later told Anzuoni that the incident is mentioned in a PowerPoint presentation given during an orientation for new employees.)

A few boxes later, Anzuoni double-parked the Lexus outside Clementine Bakery, in Clinton Hill, and jumped out to check the revenue from a dark-green news box. Twenty-two dollars and seventy-five cents in quarters. "Do you want to keep a stack for your laundry?" Anzuoni asked Fitterman, who pocketed a few. A young man who had been standing in line at Clementine for a cold brew and a cauliflower sandwich hesitantly approached the box. "I don't have any quarters," he said. Anzuoni was happy to make change.

As the guy dropped a quarter in the slot, Anzuoni whispered, "It makes such a good sound!" The customer walked away with an art book about cults and paramilitary organizations (retail: twenty-five dollars) and a Spencer Longo collage print (limited edition: priceless). "Very cool," he said.

Across town, in front of an art gallery in Chinatown, Anzuoni and Fitterman dropped off the new box, which he had nicknamed Old Blue. "All right, little buddy. Godspeed. You better be empty next time I'm here!" Anzuoni said. Fitterman headed to class, and Anzuoni mulled his next distribution project: "I really want to get a fridge—one of those fridges that you can see into, that you can get a drink out of—and I want to stock books in them and sell ice-cold books to people. Like, you ever hold a cold book in your hand? It feels amazing!" ♦

By Patricia Marx

By Evan Osnos

By Lauren Collins

By Jill Lepore

Tokyo Postcard

- Coffee, with a Side of Deadline Hectoring

Coffee, with a Side of Deadline Hectoring

The Manuscript Writing Café, in Tokyo, admits only workers facing a deadline, who can order occasional polite check-ins or an employee looming silently over them.

By Ann Tashi Slater



One recent rainy day, in the hip Tokyo neighborhood of Kōenji, Takuya Kawai greeted a customer. She was a college student, working on a translation of an interview with a refugee from Cameroon for a research project. Kawai is the proprietor of a new kind of co-working space, designed for procrastinators. After its opening, in April, Kawai tweeted, “At the Manuscript Writing Café, people who aren’t facing a deadline cannot enter! I ask for your understanding and coöperation in order to maintain the tension in the café.” The cost starts at two hundred and forty yen (about a dollar and eighty-two cents) for thirty minutes. Patrons can choose from several timed “courses.”

Kawai is an affable man in his fifties who used to work in advertising. He wore Birkenstocks, jeans, a shirt patterned with goldfish, and a blue mask.

He handed the college student a “terms of use” intake form. The café has a lot of rules, posted on the windows and on laminated cards at each of its nine seats: you must state your target upon arrival; the manager will check your progress every hour; you can’t leave until you’ve met your goal; alcohol should be consumed only after you’re done.

The idea for the café, Kawai said, came from a short story he read as a boy, Kenji Miyazawa’s “The Restaurant of Many Orders,” published in 1924, about a restaurant that is filled with signs telling customers what to do. “The Manuscript Café rules are not a joke,” he said. “This is a place for serious people.”

On her intake form, the college student wrote down her target: “15 pages in 2 hours.” The last section on the form, called “Progress Check,” asks customers to choose between “mild,” “normal,” and “hard.” If a patron checks “mild,” Kawai will ask, as the bill is being paid, “Have you met your goal for today?” “Normal” means hourly verbal encouragement. (“You can do this! “Way to go!”) “Hard” involves more frequent monitoring and what Kawai calls “silent pressure”: standing behind a customer’s chair, sometimes holding his chiwax (a Chihuahua-dachshund mix), Matcha.

“I’d like to request ‘hard,’ ” the college student said.

“Understood.” He wished her luck and suggested that she visit the rest room, even if she didn’t need to, because the décor was interesting.

Since 2019, Kawai has tried out several other themes in the space—a coffee-and-cigarettes café, a video-editing café, a café to sort receipts—but they haven’t taken off, partly because of *COVID*. “The Manuscript Café is my fourth time at bat,” he said, miming a slow-motion swing. The inspiration for this iteration came not just from the Miyazawa story but also from Tokyo’s Hilltop Hotel, where such writers as Yukio Mishima and the Nobel laureate Yasunari Kawabata were once confined by their editors, to make them finish their projects. Kawai thinks of the café as a “third space,” separate from home or the office. It caught on right away.

The café’s customers were hard at work, despite the traffic buzzing outside and the Chūō Line trains rumbling on elevated tracks across the street.

Sometimes people got up to make drip coffee at the Free-Drink Corner. In the rest room, a radio over the sink was tuned to J-Wave; vintage Walkmans, tape recorders, iPods, and rotary phones, along with a few stuffed animals, were arranged on shelves. Kawai designed the bathroom to "refresh customers' minds," an antidote to the intensity of the main area.

After tidying the Drink Corner, Kawai went around offering treats from a plate of candy and snacks; he said that he was inspired by flight attendants. "I pretend to view their screens to confirm progress," he said of his patrons. "But I don't actually look, since there are people dealing with sensitive material."

It was time for the final "hard" check-in with the college student. She had written thirteen pages. "You've made great progress!" he said. By the end of her session, she met her goal. Kawai handed her a completion sticker.

Part of the café's appeal to locals, Kawai believes, is its similarity to *juku*, or cram school, the classrooms where Japanese students prepare for entrance exams. "We all need this kind of atmosphere to overcome human weakness," Kawai said. He thinks one reason the café has attracted so much attention is that people view him as a Zen master who will whack customers with a stick if they daydream. "I don't do that, though," he said. "It would be weird." ♦

By Matt Alt

By Katy Waldman

By Anthony Lane

By Françoise Mouly

Table of Contents

NewYorker.2023.01.09
- A Critic at Large
  - Seventy-five Years After Indian Partition, Who Owns the Narrative?
- A Reporter at Large
  - Trapped in the Trenches in Ukraine
- Above & Beyond
  - Three Kings Day Parade and Celebration Is Back
- Books
  - Briefly Noted
- Comment
  - What Donald Trump's Trial Might Look Like
- Crossword
  - The Crossword: Thursday, December 22, 2022
- Dept. of Song
  - Todd Rundgren, Renaissance Rocker
- Fiction
  - "Notions of the Sacred"
- Hawaii Postcard
  - A Hawaiian Volcano vs. the Keeling Curve
- On Television
  - How "Fleishman Is in Trouble" Ditches the Clichés of the Female Midlife Crisis
- On and Off the Avenue
  - Hell on Two Wheels, Until the E-Bike's Battery Runs Out
- Onward and Upward with the Arts
  - Can a Video Game Be Prestige TV?
- Poems
  - "The Days"
  - "Eshu or Ambition"
- Profiles
  - How the Artist Kehinde Wiley Went from Picturing Power to Building It
- Shouts & Murmurs

And the Lord Said, "You've Got a Time-Out, Mister"
Tables for Two
Food Is Art at Koloman
The Art World
John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres's Portraits of the South Bronx
The Current Cinema
Damien Chazelle's "Babylon" Goes Nowhere, in a Mad Rush
The Theatre
Denis Johnson and Stephen Adly Guirgis's Drinking Games
The Wayward Press
A Media Mogul Pivots to Paper
Tokyo Postcard
Coffee, with a Side of Deadline Hectoring